

Altering Of Tapes Suspected

Experts Plan More Tests Before Report

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Both the White House and the special prosecutor's office have been informed that two of the originally subpoenaed Watergate tape recordings are suspected of being rerecorded versions of conversations rather than the original recordings they have been represented to be in court by President Nixon's lawyers.

The court-appointed panel of experts studying the recordings of President Nixon's conversations has found technical indications that cast doubt on the authenticity of the two tapes, according to informed sources at the White House and close to the prosecution. The experts plan to conduct further tests before making a final determination or issuing a report to the court, the sources said.

Despite the preliminary technical indications that the two tapes may not be originals, sources familiar with the experts' inquiry say it may be impossible for them to determine definitively their authenticity.

If the two tapes are rerecordings, informed sources said this week, it will be difficult if not impossible for the panel of tape experts appointed by U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica to determine if the original tapes have been tampered with.

The office of Special Watergate Prosecutor Leon Jaworski said it would not comment on the matter.

White House chief of staff, Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., called Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post, last night with the following comment:

"There is no such report, tentative or otherwise, by the

panel of experts.

"Our investigation of the 18½-minute gap shows that it came from a defective machine.

"There is no evidence that any of the tapes are duplicates or rerecordings.

"We are going to take it (The Post story) on like no other story has been taken on before.

"I have called the lawyers to Key Biscayne . . . we will probably go on national television. This is a humdinger. I am putting you on notice that we feel this is a gross intrusion on grand jury proceedings."

White House counsel J. Fred Buzhardt said Friday he is "dead sure" that the originals of the subpoenaed tapes have been given to the court as ordered. "This is one I'm

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not in doubt about," Buzhardt said, adding that any story on preliminary findings of the tape experts would be "irresponsible."

To back up his conclusion, Buzhardt said that independent tests established that the tapes are originals. He declined to discuss these tests.

The White House learned of the latest question about the President's Watergate tapes several weeks ago. According to sources there, the news discouraged some of those in the White House who are attempting to help Mr. Nixon extricate himself from his Watergate troubles.

White House sources also reported that work is now under way to develop information challenging the methods of the court-appointed panel of tape experts in the event that its final report might contend that the tapes are not originals.

Altogether, nine White House tape recordings of presidential conversations touching on Watergate were initially subpoenaed by the office of the special prosecutor last year. White House lawyers have since testified in an inquiry conducted by Judge Sirica here that two of the nine tapes never existed. A third recording was found to contain an 18½-minute gap that the panel of experts attributed to five to nine separate erasures.

The two tapes that the experts now suspect are not originals

are among the six remaining recordings. According to informed sources, they involve at least one crucial early 1973 Watergate conversation between Mr. Nixon and his

chief accuser in the Watergate coverup, former White House counsel John W. Dean III.

The dates of the two tapes under suspicion could not be learned with certainty last week.

Specifically, the sources said investigators are concentrating on a key discussion of the Watergate coverup that Dean maintained took place on March 13, 1973, but which apparently occurs in the March 21, 1973, tape.

The White House has insisted that the conversation did in fact take place on March 21 and has used that assertion to challenge Dean's credibility. The date on which the President first learned of the Watergate coverup — March 21, according to Mr. Nixon — is one of the key issues on which his claim of uninvolved turns.

Earlier Friday, however White House counsel Buzhardt said in a lengthy interview that he is "dead sure that all the tapes are originals" and predicted that the panel of experts will affirm their authenticity.

Buzhardt said he had recently heard that the panel of experts had questioned the authenticity of the two tapes. He said he could not remember who told him so.

However, Buzhardt questioned the expertise of the members of the panel and said he believes the White House

will be able to show that the court-appointed experts were incorrect in their previous conclusion that erasures caused the 18½-minute gap in the recording of a June 20, 1972, conversation between Mr. Nixon and his former top aide, H. R. Haldeman.

According to Buzhardt, the only rerecordings of the subpoenaed Watergate tapes were two faithful copies made on his orders by the National Security Agency. One of the copies is in his possession, Buzhardt said, but he declined to say who had the other. Judge Sirica "is fully aware of its disposition," he added.

Neither of the NSA-made copies, Buzhardt said, was submitted as subpoenaed evidence to Sirica.

Another source familiar with the work of the panel said that the White House and the special prosecutor's office are aware of the preliminary findings of the tape experts through observers they have monitoring the panel.

Still another source familiar with the work of the panel cautioned against publication of preliminary findings. "The panel is obviously in the middle of their work, and the conclusion could completely be the reverse of what they may

have now," the source said.

Not all members of the panel of six experts have examined each of the subpoenaed tapes, this source said, so it will be at least several weeks before any scientifically documented conclusion could be reached.

Judge Sirica has not been informed of any of the tentative indications, the sources said.

Another government source said that the White House is poised to launch an attack on the panel, and the experts are aware of this, and accordingly going to be very cautious in a written report to Judge Sirica.

Tape reels that include most of the subpoenaed conversations between President Nixon and John Dean were first checked out by White House aide Stephen Bull on April 25, 1973, according to testimony given in court before Sirica.

This was less than a week after Dean had publicly broken with the White House—although he still worked there—and announced that he would not be a "scapegoat" for others in the Watergate scandal.

According to court testimony, it was this statement that prompted Bull to ask the Secret Service if Dean knew of the secret taping system that recorded all conversations in the President's Oval office in the White House and in his office in the Executive Office Building.

Bull was assured that Dean did not know of the system. A total of 22 reels of tape were kept out by Bull for less than four hours on April 25. These tapes were checked out again the next day and kept for six days.

On June 4, 1973, Bull checked out 26 reels of the taped conversations and Mr. Nixon spent nearly 12 hours listening to them.

Again in July before the existence of the taping system was publicly disclosed, Haldeman checked out some of the tapes, including the reel containing the March 13 conversation between the President and Dean.