

NY Times JAN 18 1974
**WHITEHOUSE VOWS
FULL COOPERATION
WITH F.B.I. ON TAPE**

JAN 18 1974
Agents Question Members

of Presidential Staff on
Erasure of Segment
NY Times

By LESLEY OELSNER
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 17—The White House promised today to "cooperate totally" with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's inquiry into the erasure of a key 18½-minute segment of Watergate tape recording.

The pledge came from President Nixon's deputy press secretary, Gerald L. Warren, as the bureau's agents interviewed White House staff members about the circumstances surrounding the erasure of the Presidential tapes.

Leon Jaworski, the special Watergate prosecutor, ordered the bureau's investigation yesterday after a court-appointed panel of six technical experts reported to the Federal District Court here Tuesday that the 18½-minute gap had been caused by at least five separate erasures and rerecordings, and not by the single accidental pressing of a wrong button on a tape recorder, as the White House had suggested.

Panel Report Discussed

Mr. Warren refused to say whether the White House considered the investigation necessary. Nor would he answer a question about how Mr. Nixon would respond to a request by the bureau to interview him personally. He said, however, that Mr. Nixon had discussed the expert panel's report with the White House chief of staff, Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., and with his press spokesman, Ronald L. Ziegler.

"He wants to get to the bottom of the situation," Mr. Warren said.

Common Cause, meanwhile, named Mr. Nixon in a subpoena seeking financial records to determine if his backers fully disclosed all expenses and contributions in the 1972 Presidential campaign. [Details on Page 16.]

Chief Judge John J. Sirica continued today to press his own inquiry into the erasure, taking testimony from two Se-

cret Service agents assigned to the White House. In the process, he informed the White House counsel that they had no right to be present when the lawyers from the special Watergate prosecution force interviewed Secret Service members outside the courtroom.

The prosecution wanted the
continued on Page 16, Column 6

Continued From Page 1, Col. 2

tape for the grand jury to learn who had been telling the truth about the burglary of the Democrats' headquarters in the Watergate complex and the subsequent cover-up. The erasure apparently involved a conversation between Mr. Nixon and his then chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, on June 20, 1972, three days after the break-in. Mr. Haldeman's notes of the meeting show they discussed Watergate.

Before the technical experts made their report, the White House suggested that the erasure had been caused when Mr. Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, pushed the wrong button while making a transcript of the tape.

The White House contends that two other conversations on which the prosecutor wanted tapes were never recorded.

One of the Secret Service agents on the stand today, Raymond C. Zumwalt, provided new insights about the apprehensive mood at the White House.

He testified that last November, four months after the White House tape recording system was dismantled in the wake of public disclosure that it existed, the Secret Service cut the wires leading to the system's microphones, which had been left in place. The wires were cut to prevent anyone at the White House from somehow using the microphones to pick up Presidential conversations, he said.

Mr. Zumwalt said that, when the taping system was dismantled in July, the recorders were removed and "some" of the cables were cut, although, as was testified yesterday, the microphones were left in their original positions, in Mr. Nixon's offices and the Cabinet Room, as were many of the wires.

In November, Mr. Zumwalt said, the wires leading from the microphones were cut close to the microphones.

"It is just not very good policy to have a hot microphone in the office," Mr. Zumwalt said.

Periodic Checks Made

Mr. Zumwalt explained, "We have a countermeasure section which pulls periodic audio checks on the various offices." White House lawyers said later that the Secret Service was simply concerned that "someone in the White House might

somehow be able to pick up conversations from the recorder unless the wires were cut."

Under questioning by the assistant special prosecutor, Richard Ben-Veniste, Mr. Zumwalt told the court that the cutting of the wires took place after Judge Sirica began holding his hearings on the Watergate tape recordings.

Mr. Ben-Veniste declined later to say whether he considered this action improper. However, in view of the fact that an inquiry into the nonexistence or erasure of tapes might require inspection of the taping system, it is considered possible that alteration of the system in the course of the hearing could be considered improper, or even possibly, obstruction of justice.

Significance Foreseen

Mr. Ben-Veniste also elicited from Mr. Zumwalt the disclosure that at least some persons at the White House realized as soon as the Watergate break-in occurred that the taping system might have some significance in the days to come.

Under questioning by the prosecutor, Mr. Zumwalt said that the Secret Service discussed as long ago as 1971 the possibility that the White House Taping system could be improved. The service started in July, 1971, a "project" was designed to improve the system, he said.

Then, apparently having had an internal Secret Service report on the subject, Mr. Ben-Veniste asked if the witness recalled telling a Secret Service inspector, "When the Watergate break-in was exposed, this project was put on a hold basis and never used."

Mr. Zumwalt, a short, stocky man who at times seemed uncomfortable and uneasy to be in the witness chair, answered, "Yes."

Mr. Ben-Veniste did not follow up the matter.

Mr. Zumwalt was followed to the stand by one of his superiors, Louis B. Sims, who told the court, among other things, that a former Presidential aide, Alexander P. Butterfield, asked him a year ago about the possibility of transcribing all the White House tapes.

Mr. Sims said he had told Mr. Butterfield that a transcription project would endanger the secrecy of the taping system.

Mr. Sims also testified that, immediately after John W. Dean 3d, the President's former counsel, declared last April that he would not be made a "scapegoat" in the Watergate scandal, another Presidential aide asked him whether Mr. Dean knew about the existence of the taping system.

Mr. Sims said that he had told the aide, Stephen B. Bull, that the Secret Service would not have told Mr. Deane about the system but that he "could not speak" for anyone else who

might have known about it.

Dean's Senate Testimony

Mr. Dean testified at the Senate Watergate hearings last summer that, when he went to see Mr. Nixon last April 15 to discuss the fact that he had spoken to Federal prosecutors about the cover-up, he suspected Mr. Nixon might be taping the conversation.

Mr. Sims's testimony disclosed evidence of the specific concern of various White House aides about the tape with the 18½-minute gap.

Mr. Sims testified, for instance, that Mr. Bull, now the President's appointments secretary, asked him last Nov. 26 for the date of purchase of the tape recorder Miss Woods used in listening to the tape.

Nov. 26 was the day the White House told Judge Sirica of its theory that Miss Woods had caused the erasure. Yesterday Mr. Sims testified that the recorder was purchased Oct. 1, the day of Miss Wood's alleged accident.

Since the panel has concluded that the erasures were made on that particular recorder, Mr. Sims's testimony yesterday meant that the search for the person who erased the 18½-minute segment could be narrowed to those persons who had access to both the tape and the recorder on Oct. 1 and afterward.

Nixon Logs Sought

The Watergate prosecution is now pressing for information about who had access in that period. As part of that effort, Mr. Ben-Veniste asked today for the White House logs showing Mr. Nixon's activities in Key Biscayne, Fla., the weekend of Oct. 4-7, the weekend Miss Woods and Mr. Bull took the recorder and tape with them to Key Biscayne.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose reports Mr. Warren said Mr. Nixon expected to receive, was also seeking to determine who had access to the tape and the recorder.

Agents were interviewing White House staff members in an effort to pin down, minute by minute and day by day, the access to both items, an agent from the External Affairs Division of the bureau's Washington field office, which is handling the investigation, said today.

The agent declined to say how many people were working on the investigation but remarked, "There are a lot of us."

Nor would he say whom the agents were interviewing. However, the list would probably include those already known to have had access to the tapes—Miss Woods, Mr. Bull, Gen. John C. Bennett, the Presidential aide in charge of the White House collection of tapes, and J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., a White House counsel.

It is not expected, however, that an agent from the field office would interview Mr. Nixon. If any interview was held with the President, it would probably be conducted by someone in a much higher position.



The New York Times

Louis B. Sims, a Secret Service agent, leaving U.S. District Court in Washington after giving testimony.