

Quality of Tapes 'Poor' Court Told

Washington

President Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, said yesterday that some of the tape recordings of White House conversations are of such poor quality that the President and his visitors are inaudible or drowned out by extraneous noises.

Miss Woods told U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica that she had been unable to prepare a full transcript of the tapes subpoenaed by the Watergate prosecutors, as Mr. Nixon had requested in late September, because the recordings were so difficult to understand.

"The quality is very bad on some, depending on the room," she reported. "There are a lot of funny things. If the President puts his feet up on the desk, it sounds like a bomb hitting you right in the ears."

At various times, Miss Woods explained, the tapes are obscured by the noise of dishes being picked up, the President whistling, his guests shuffling their feet during lulls in the conversation and a hand playing outside the White House.

VALUE

The testimony by Miss Woods aroused immediate speculation that the value of the tapes as evidence for the Watergate grand jury would be reduced to the extent that key conversations may prove unintelligible.

During her appearance, the Nixon aide spiked a day-old report that she had discovered a "gap" in the tape of an April 15 conversation between the President and John W. Dean III, then his counsel. John C. Bennett, deputy assistant to the President, quoted Miss Woods to that effect Wednesday.

Just before she left the White House for court yesterday, Miss Woods said, J.

Fred Buzhardt Jr., special counsel to the President, found a tape covering the first part of that day in the Executive Office Building

Back Page Col. 7

From Page 1

and it included the Nixon-Dean meeting.

"Are you satisfied there is no gap in the tapes?" Samuel J. Powers, a White House attorney, asked Miss Woods.

"Perfectly satisfied," she replied.

Jill Vollner, an assistant special prosecutor, asked Miss Woods if she had taken some precautions to avoid erasing any of the White House tapes while she attempted to transcribe them.

"Everyone said to me: 'Be terribly careful,'" she replied. "I don't think I'm so stupid that they had to go over and over it. I used every possible precaution."

"What precaution?" Miss Vollner inquired.

"I used my head, the only one I had to use," Miss Woods snapped back.

HOURS

The President's secretary said that the quality of the first tape she attempted to transcribe, in a cottage at Camp David on September 29, was so bad that it took her more than 30 hours to transcribe a meeting that the White House logs as lasting 90 minutes.

H. R. Haldeman, former White House chief of staff, also testified and characterized the quality of one of the tapes he had heard as "quite adequate for getting a report of the conversation" despite "ups and downs" and "some bad intervals." Haldeman, tanned with his once-short hair combed back over a bald spot, testified under subpoena by the Watergate prosecution.

Haldeman, who resigned under pressure during the Senate Watergate hearings, said he thought he had returned 22 tapes on April 26, the same day he had taken them out. The Secret Service logs indicate, however, that the tapes did not come back until May 2.

Haldeman said that the one tape he listened to involved a March 21 conversation between the President and Dean. Mr. Nixon had

NOV 9 1973

asked him to review "specific points raised in the meeting," Haldeman said.

DISCREPANCY

Miss Woods' testimony raised an apparent discrepancy in White House testimony. She said she had been given eight tapes for the September 28-29 working

weekend at Camp David. Steven V. Bull, a presidential aide, had said earlier this week that 13 tapes had been taken to the mountain retreat.

Conceding concern over the "fragility" of the secret Watergate tapes, White House lawyer Powers disclosed that copies of the tapes are being made to

More Watergate news on Pages 10-13

make sure all recordings of subpoenaed presidential conversations are preserved.

Asked whether the White House is concerned that something might happen to the tapes through "innocent human error," Powers replied, "yes, we are."

When the fact-finding hearings continue next week, both the White House and the Watergate prosecutors are expected to call technical electronics experts to testify on the malfunctioning of recording equipment and the editing of tape.

New York Times

* See WXP 9 Nov 73, Lardner, who makes clear that what is described here as "the one tape" is the one tape of the 22 that Haldeman says he audited.