

Watergate Announcement

A New Blank Spot In Nixon's Tapes

Judge Asks For Rest of The Reels

Washington

The White House said yesterday that an 18-minute segment of another of President Nixon's subpoenaed Watergate tapes is blank.

White House special counsel J. Fred Buzhardt told U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica that "the phenomenon" cropped up in the midst of a recorded conversation between Mr. Nixon and former White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman.

That conversation took place in Mr. Nixon's executive office building suite on June 20, 1972, three days after discovery of the break-in and bugging at Democratic national headquarters here. According to former Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox's subpoena: "There is every reason to infer that the meeting included discussion of the Watergate incident."

Dismayed at the report of another missing conversation, Judge Sirica gave the President until Monday to submit all the extant Cox-subpoenaed recordings for safekeeping at the U.S. courthouse here. 26 NOV

If Mr. Nixon is unwilling to do that voluntarily, Sirica said he will ask Watergate prosecutors to issue a fresh subpoena for the full reels of tape containing the disputed conversations.

The judge said he was taking the step "not because the court doesn't trust the White House or the Presi-

dent" but "in the interest of seeing that nothing else happens" to the still secret tapes.

Sirica had been planning to leave the original recordings in White House custody until a panel of experts completed a series of tests for any signs of tampering, a

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process that is expected to take several weeks.

Except for the June 20 conversation with Haldeman, however, Buzhardt told the court yesterday that "all of the other tapes subpoenaed have been audible throughout."

Buzhardt said the June 20 discussion breaks off into what he described as "an audible tone and no conversation" for an 18-minute interval.

The White House lawyer said he was told that whatever was said between Mr. Nixon and Haldeman has been lost forever. "It is my understanding that it cannot be gotten back," Buzhardt told reporters yesterday.

The startling new development came just after Mr. Nixon assured Republican governors in Memphis that the GOP would not be hit with any more bombshells in the Watergate case.

"If there are any more bombs, I'm not aware of them," the President told the governors Tuesday, at their winter conference. 20 NOV

Buzhardt acknowledged that the President knew of the problem with the June 20 tape when he made that remark.

The White House lawyer said the fact that a segment was missing was discovered November 14, when he and other attorneys for the President were playing back a

copy of the original tape to compile an analysis and index that had been ordered by the courts.

Mr. Nixon, Buzhardt said, was told "shortly thereafter."

Asked how the President could have promised no more bombshells, Buzhardt told reporters: "I don't think it's a bombshell."

Buzhardt added that he did not think the President "understood precisely" that one of the subpoenaed tapes was involved.

Buzhardt's remarks indi-

cated that the White House at least briefly contemplated taking the legal position that the June 20 meeting with Haldeman was not covered by the Cox subpoena because of what Buzhardt called its "ambiguity."

Cox's subpoena, Buzhardt said, described the June 20 session as just "one meeting" between the President,

former White House aide John D. Ehrlichman and Haldeman. Actually, the White House sessions, the first between Mr. Nixon and Ehrlichman and the second between Mr. Nixon and Haldeman.

The sessions had been pre-faced by a get-together earlier that same day at the White House between Haldeman, Ehrlichman, former attorney general John N. Mitchell, former White House counsel John W. Dean III and, reportedly, Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst.

"This was their first opportunity for full discussion of how to handle the Watergate incident," Cox said in his subpoena, "and Ehrlichman has testified that Watergate was indeed the primary subject of the meeting."

"From there," the subpoena said, "Ehrlichman and then Haldeman went to see the President. The inference that they reported on Watergate, and may well have received instructions, is almost irresistible."

White House aides apparently also had been busy the day before these sessions. On June 19, Dean has said, he spoke to several people, including Watergate conspirator S. Gordon Liddy.

According to reported logs of Mr. Nixon's meetings on June 20, the President met with Ehrlichman from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The meeting with Haldeman, including the 18 missing minutes, apparently lasted from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Buzhardt said the White House conducted "a large number of technical tests" with the problem tape Tuesday, but all were "unsuccessful." 20 NOV

"We don't know what the character of the problem is," Buzhardt told reporters. The cause, he said, also is unknown.

The new disclosure came three weeks after the White House announcement that two other subpoenaed conversations had never been recorded.

One of those was a telephone discussion between the President and John N. Mitchell, who was then Mr. Nixon's campaign manager. According to Mr. Nixon, that conversation took place over a telephone, in the living quarters at the White House, that was not connected to the recording system.

The other missing tape involves a meeting between Mr. Nixon and Dean on the night of April 15. Mr. Nixon said that the tape had run out before that meeting began.

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