

Miss Woods Erased Part of Key Tape

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 25—President Nixon's personal secretary erased a key 18-minute segment of one of the most important Watergate tapes, Administration officials said today.

The officials, confirming a report first published in The Los Angeles Times, said that the erasure occurred while Rose Mary Woods, one of Mr. Nixon's closest associates, was listening to and preparing summaries of the recordings.

They said that the erasure was "inadvertent."

But an expert in electronic recordings said that, barring some highly unusual malfunction in the machine, it would be very difficult to wipe out such a long passage by mistake. Most tape recorders, the expert said, are designed to prevent such mishaps from occurring, even when the machines are operated by novices.

Thus the disclosure of Miss Woods' role in the erasure, like the disclosure of the erasure itself, appeared likely to hinder further the President's new drive for credibility.

Haldeman Conversation

The tapet was of a conversation on Watergate between President Nixon and H. R. Haldeman, his chief of staff, three days after the June 17, 1972 burglary occurred.

Last Wednesday, when J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., the White House special counsel, announced in Federal Court that the gap in the tape existed, Chief Judge John J. Sirica ordered that custody of the original tapes be given to him. The White House attorneys will respond to that order in court tomorrow.

Apparently, the role of Miss Woods in the erasure will come out at the same time. Asked for comment on the situation today, Gerald L. Warren, the deputy White House press secretary, said that "we expect to develop all of that in the courtroom tomorrow morning."

On Wednesday, Mr. Buzhardt said that tests had been conducted at the White House in an effort to determine why an 18-minute segment of the June 20 tape contained nothing but "an audible tone," but that the tests had provided no answers.

The Administration officials who disclosed Miss Woods' role could give no explanation of why Mr. Buzhardt did not mention it on Wednesday.

There have been repeated tardy disclosures of developments surrounding the tapes. For example, Mr. Buzhardt

knew of the erasure for a week before it was made public. During the interim Mr. Nixon told a group of Republican Governors in Memphis that he knew of no further "bombshells." The Governors have been muttering bitterly ever since. Gov. Daniel J. Evans of Washington said yesterday, "He just didn't level with us, square with us."

Senator Charles McC. Mathias, a Republican liberal from Maryland, commented in much the same vein on the Columbia Broadcasting System's television program, "Face the Nation."

"The only way you are going to get rid of the confusion which has grown instead of

diminished as a result of the piecemeal disclosures," he said is "massive, complete, total disclosure" of the evidence. "Unless there is this kind of a disclosure, I think the alternatives to impeachment become less and less."

Miss Woods, who was directed by the President late in September to transcribe the tapes of his discussions with principals in the Watergate scandal, was asked in court on Nov. 8 whether she had taken some precaution to avoid erasure.

"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."