

Nixon's Secretary Says She
Erased Tapes -- a 'Mistake'

18-Minute Watergate 'Gap'

Washington

President Nixon's personal secretary testified yesterday that through some "terrible mistake" she had pressed the wrong button on her tape recorder and caused an 18-minute "gap" in one of the subpoenaed Watergate tape recordings.

She said that she had told the President of the error minutes after it occurred, and that he had assured her it did not matter.

"He said, 'There's no problem because that's not one of the subpoenaed tapes,'" the secretary, Rose Mary Woods, testified in U.S. District Court here.

Mr. Nixon did remark that "It was too bad," Miss Woods recounted. But he told her that he understood, she testified, and said to her, "Don't worry about it."

Miss Woods said she caused the "gap" by accidentally pushing the wrong button on the tape recorder as she tried to transcribe the tape recording for Mr. Nixon last October 1.

She insisted that she had no idea what the missing segment contained. She said he had never listened to it, because White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. told her that it was not covered by the Watergate grand jury's subpoena.

The controversial tape involves a 55-minute meeting between Mr. Nixon and former White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman on June 20, 1972, just three days after discovery of the break-in and bugging of Democratic National Headquarters here.

Miss Woods said the last thing she heard on the recording was a chat between

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ROSE MARY WOODS AND HER LAWYER
Charles Rhyne escorted President's secretary to court

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the President and Haldeman about a trip to the West, including a few words about Ely, Nev., where Mrs. Nixon was born.

The tape then deteriorates into what White House lawyers described as a constant hum—"without any audible conversation—for 18¼ minutes.

Notes taken by Haldeman indicate that the first topic discussed after the exchange about Ely was the Watergate case.

"Be sure EOB (Executive Office Building) office is thoroughly checked re bugs at all times," Haldeman wrote at the top of his second page of notes. "What is our counterattack?"

"PR offensive to top this," Haldeman's notes continue. "Hit the opposition w/ their activities. Point out libertarians have created public callousness. Do they justify this less than stealing Pentagon Papers, Anderson file,

etc.? We should be on the attack for diversion.

Assistant Watergate special prosecutor Jill Volner charged at yesterday's court session that Haldeman's notes showed that the portion obliterated related to Watergate.

Acting White House counsel Leonard Garment jumped to his feet, objecting strenuously to the characterization.

U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica replied dryly that "the exhibit (Haldeman's notes) will speak for itself." The judge then had Mrs. Volner read the notes into the record.

Interrupting the testimony from the bench at times, Sirica expressed concern that Miss Woods had not told the court of the 18-minute blank spot in the tape when she first testified before him on November 8.

By her account, both she and Mr. Nixon had known of the "accident" with the recording since October 1, when it occurred.

"Didn't you think it was important on November 8 to tell everything you knew had happened?" Sirica asked her.

Miss Woods said she thought she was supposed to testify "only about subpoenaed tapes."

"It was my very first time ever in a courtroom," she said of her November 8 appearance. "I was petrified. I understood we were talking only about the subpoenaed tapes. All I can say is that I am dreadfully sorry."

Sirica then asked for a re-reading of Miss Woods' testimony November 8, when she said she used "every possible precaution" to prevent any accidental erasures. When she was asked "what precautions," she replied testily at that session: "I used my head. It was the only one I had to use."

The excerpt having been read, Sirica leaned back in his chair and said, "That was the part I wanted to hear."

Submitting a 22-page summary with the reels of tape that they turned over to Judge Sirica's "protective custody," White House lawyers contended that the missing 18-minute interval "was caused by the depression of a record button during the process of reviewing the tape, possibly while the recorder was in the proximity of an electric typewriter and a high-intensity lamp"



UPI Telephoto

NIXON COUNSEL J. FRED BUZHARDT
He carried Watergate tapes into U.S. District Court

at Miss Woods' desk.

They also said that there was nothing on the June 20, 1973, tape as it now exists that relates to the Watergate scandal besides the 55-minute session earlier the same day between Mr. Nixon and former White House domestic adviser John D. Ehrlichman.

Miss Woods said she mistakenly pressed the "record" button on the machine she was using when she turned around at her desk in the White House October 1 to answer the phone. While on the phone, she said, she must have kept her foot on the foot pedal that she had been using the playback the tape on the machine, a Uher Universal 5000 model.

She said, however, that she thought she had been on the phone only about 5 1/2 minutes — not 18 minutes.

Under questioning by Mrs. Volner, Miss Woods acknowledged that she could have stopped the machine simply by taking her foot off the foot pedal instead of trying to press the "stop" button.

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"Then why did you push the button?" Mrs. Volner demanded.

"Because I've done it both ways," Miss Woods said.

Accompanied by her own lawyer, Charles S. Rhyne, Miss Woods was called to the stand yesterday morning with a warning from Watergate prosecutors that anything she said could be used against her.

Far more subdued than when she testified before, the President's long-time secretary added new and sometimes conflicting details about her handling of the June 20 tape when it was first given to her at Camp David last September 29.

The Watergate grand jury had subpoenaed it as a recording of a meeting "involving Richard Nixon, John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman from 10:30 a.m. to noon (time approximate)."

Miss Woods testified earlier this month that she spent more than 30 hours trying to type out the "gist" of the recording, at Mr. Nixon's request. She said then that "it was between the President and Ehrlichman chiefly and Holdeman briefly . . . It seemed to me that it lasted for months. It must have been a two - hour or three - hour meeting."

Yesterday, however, Miss Woods said she typed out only the remarks between the President and Ehrlichman and none of the conversation between the President and Haldeman. She also said that it was only a 55-minute meeting with Ehrlichman that she worked on.

Miss Woods said she never tried to transcribe the session with Haldeman because of instructions she got over the phone from Haig on the morning of September 29, while she was at Camp David. She said Haig called "to tell us that the second part (the meeting with Haldeman) was not subpoenaed."

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