

investigations

A Matter of 18 Minutes

ON JULY 23, 1973, Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox sought permission to subpoena nine presidential tapes presumed to have conversations relating to the Watergate affair.

(President Nixon had fought the subpoena and lost in the court of U.S. District Judge John Sirica, then in the Court of Appeals, October 12.

On August 13, before the Appeals Court's decision, Cox had filed an explanation of why he wanted to hear the tape of the June 20, 1972, meeting in the Executive Office Building (EOB) "involving Richard Nixon, John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman from 10:30 a.m. to noon (time approximate)."

"Early on the morning of June 20, H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, John Mitchell, John Dean and Attorney General Richard Kleindienst met in the White House. This was their first opportunity for full discussion of how to handle the Watergate incident, and Ehrlichman has testified that Watergate was indeed the primary subject of the meeting.

"From there 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..."

To Camp David

On September 29 and 30 the President's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, took a number of tapes to Camp David, where she spent 30 hours, she said, trying to figure out what was on the June 20 tape.

She was still working on that tape when she returned to Washington and her desk in the Executive Office Building October 1. She was only concerned about the Ehrlichman part of the tape because at 10 a.m. on September 29 the President's chief of staff, Alexander Haig, had called her to say only the Ehrlichman conversation was to be transcribed.

On October 1, Miss Woods was later to testify, she by "accident" punched the "record" button, while answering the telephone, kept her

subpoenaed tapes." Buzhardt was also informed of the 18-minute wipe-out, she said.

On October 12 the Court of Appeals ordered the White House to produce the nine Watergate tapes for Sirica to hear, including that of June 20.

On October 23, White House lawyer Charles Alan Wright told Judge Sirica the White House was "prepared to comply in all respects" with the subpoena. All nine tapes would be produced.

'Used My Head'

On November 3, Rose Mary Woods testified about the difficulties of transcribing the tapes: "Everyone said to me, 'Be careful.' I don't think I'm so stupid that they had to go over and over it. I used every possible precaution."

The President's secretary said she had goofed

"What precaution?" asked Mrs. Jill Vollner, assistant Watergate prosecutor.

"I used my head, the only one I had to use," Miss Woods replied tartly.

November 14 was the date Buzhardt said he first learned the 18 minutes of the June 20th tape were missing. He reported the gap to President Nixon "shortly thereafter," according to his subsequent testimony before Judge Sirica, but not to anyone else.

Meanwhile, President Nixon began "Operation Can-

dor" during which he talked to all Republican Congressmen and Senators as well as many Democrats in Congress, then went on a five-day speaking tour of the South.

On November 20 in Memphis he had a session with 16 Republican Governors that was so effective host Governor Winfield Dunn of Tennessee later told newsmen happily:

"The President was asked if there were any other (Watergate) bombs waiting in the wings and the President said if there were, he is not aware of them. If there is any information waiting to be revealed, it is information he does not have. And I think that's about as frank and honest a statement as anyone could give."

18 Minutes

On November 21, Buzhardt reported to Judge Sirica that 18 minutes of the June 20 tape were only "an audible tone."

On November 22, Rose Mary Woods consulted a lawyer, Charles Rhyne.

On November 26, Miss Woods explained how the 18 minutes vanished.

However, when she demonstrated in court the way it had happened (using the same \$500 Uher Universal 5000 model recording machine), when she reached for the imaginary telephone her foot automatically lifted off the pedal, stopping the machine.

The man who sold the Uher was called to testify and said it was perfectly possible she could have erased something by acci-

dent. But it would be very hard to do, he said.

Judge Sirica seemed upset by Miss Woods' testimony and asked why she didn't mention the missing 18 minutes when she testified November 8.

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

Last Tuesday for the first time the court and public heard a Watergate tape — portions of the June 20, including the full 18 minutes of buzzing plus 20 minutes of gibberish. The most that could easily be heard was: "I'd like a little of that consomme today" (the President's voice) and "The press was violently pro-Humphrey," by some unidentified voice.

Judge Sirica ordered all the originals of the tapes placed in the custody of the court immediately, "not because the court doesn't trust the President, but in the interest of seeing that nothing else happens to them."

What had particularly irked Judge Sirica was that the missing 18 minutes were the portion that concerned Watergate Committee, clear by notes taken by Haldeman at the time.

foot on the control pedal and took notes on a 5-¼ minute phone conversation. As a result, 18 minutes of the taped Haldeman-Nixon conversation became nothing but a steady "buzz."

Miss Woods immediately informed the President. "Don't worry about it," she quoted Mr. Nixon as saying, "There's no problem because that's not one of the



UPI Telephoto

ROSE MARY WOODS

