

Haldeman SF Chronicle Knew of the Tapes Gap

Washington

Former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman knew of the controversial "gap" in one of President Nixon's subpoenaed Watergate tapes a week before the erasure was reported to the courts.

Haldeman's onetime deputy, Lawrence M. Higby, testified yesterday that Haldeman told him of the missing segment around November 15. At about the same time, Higby said, Haldeman instructed him to find Haldeman's closely guarded notes of the meeting in question.

"I think he just said, 'apparently there's a gap in one of the tapes,'" Higby recalled. "I think he said it had been caused by Miss Woods (President Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods)."

The 18¼-minute erasure was not reported to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica until November 21. At hearings since then, Sirica has expressed growing concern over the White House's failure to report it more quickly — and at its admitted inability to explain how the segment was obliterated.

Higby said he believed Haldeman told him of the gap in the tape recording around noon on November 14 during a phone conversation with Haldeman, who now lives in California. Now an official in the Office of Management and Budget, Higby said Haldeman might have first mentioned it to him in the course of another phone call, on the night of November 15, but he said he thought it was "the day before."

White House special counsel J. Fred Buzhardt Jr. has said that he did not discover the long erasure himself until the evening of November 14, when he was reviewing a copy of the subpoenaed re-

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ording. Buzhardt said he told current White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr., and then Mr. Nixon, about it the next day, November 15.

The White House lawyer has said that Mr. Nixon was "baffled" by the report.

Haldeman's notes on the

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June 20, 1972, conversation between him and the President show that a discussion of the Watergate affair had been held.

Higby's testimony indicated that Haldeman still had control of his files at the White House seven months after his resignation as the President's chief of staff.

After chatting with Haldeman at noon on November 14, Higby said he got another call from his old boss the next evening while Higby was getting a quick shave in the White House gym.

"I think he indicated I was to get only one document — his June 20 (1972) notes," Higby said. He said Haldeman told him to see Haig first, but Haldeman gave him strict instructions not to give White House officials any of his notes without first reporting back to Haldeman with a summary of what they contained.

Higby said he gave Haig that message, unearthed the notes from Room 522 at the Executive Office Building where they are being kept under Secret Service guard with other sensitive Watergate-related files, and placed another call to Haldeman in California. "I just read the notes off to him," Higby said.

Asked what reaction he

got, Higby recalled Haldeman's saying "Oh . . ." "Hm . . ." and finally, "That's no problem."

Higby said he took Haldeman's enigmatic "Hm . . ." to mean, "They'll probably try to make a big deal of that."

The June 20, 1972, recording was erased for a 18¼-minute interval that included what Haldeman jotted down as a discussion of a "PR offensive" to counter publicity over the Watergate break-in and bugging, which had been discovered just three days earlier.

"We should be on the attack for diversion," Haldeman wrote of his missing chat with the President.

After getting the go-ahead from Haldeman, Higby said he turned over the two pages of notes to Haig and Buzhardt, who by then had turned up at Room 522.

"I think there was some pressure to get these notes (to the President) as quickly as possible," Higby said.

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