



Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. arriving at court yesterday



Rose Mary Woods, left, President Nixon's personal secretary, walking to court with Marjorie Acker, staff aide.

By LESLEY OELSNER

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 5—President Nixon was "very, very disturbed" and "almost incredulous" when he was told Nov. 15 that there was an 18-minute gap in one of the subpoenaed White House tape recordings, Alexander M. Haig Jr., his chief of staff, testified today.

Mr. Haig said that he heard the news Nov. 14 from one of the President's lawyers but that he decided to withhold the information from the President until the next day to allow Mr. Nixon to give a speech to a group of realtors without the burden of the new disclosure.

"I felt the situation was sufficiently worrisome, I should let him complete his speech," Mr. Haig said.

Last week Mr. Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, testified that on Oct. 1 she pressed the wrong button on her tape recorder while reviewing the tape and that, when she discovered her mistake, she found on the tape, instead of conversation, a "shrill" buzzing sound that lasted several minutes. She testified that she immediately informed the President.

However, the White House position has been that, first the full extent of the gap on the tape was not discovered until Nov. 14 and, second, it was not until Nov. 14 that the White House realized the tape had been subpoenaed for the Watergate grand jury.

Miss Woods testified that

said, come several days later when the President was in Memphis to deliver a speech to the Republican Governors—the speech in which he assured the Governors that there were no more "bombshells" to come.

That information, the witness said, was a telephone report from Mr. Buzhardt, Jr., the President's lawyer, that he could find no explanation for the buzzing tone that is heard on the June 20 tape for 18 minutes 15 seconds.

"That was a very shocking piece of news to me," Mr. Haig said.

The President, when he was informed just after his meeting with the Governors, was "very concerned," the witness said.

Insists on Disclosure

The President, according to Mr. Haig, insisted that the matter be quickly disclosed to Chief Judge John J. Sirica of the Federal District Court, the presiding judge in the inquiry into the Watergate tapes.

Mr. Haig's testimony, given in relaxed and confident tones in the concluding week of Judge Sirica's inquiry, was interpreted by many in the courtroom as an attempt to repair some of the damage caused by previous testimony and disclosures.

One of the biggest targets of criticism, for instance, has been the White House contention last week that it did not know the Haldeman-Nixon conversation was covered by the subpoena until Nov. 14 because, it said, the subpoena was written in "ambiguous" fashion. But Samuel Powers, Florida trial lawyer who joined the Nixon legal team in the Watergate case last month, testified yesterday that when he was shown the subpoena Nov. 14 he could tell that the Haldeman-Nixon conversation was covered.

'Almost Incredulous'

Mr. Haig testified that Mr. Buzhardt went to him Nov. 14, after listening to the tape, and told him that the gap on the tape, previously thought to be no longer than five minutes, actually lasted 18 minutes—and that, in addition, he had "assessed" the subpoena and, after hearing Mr. Powers's view had decided that it did cover the Haldeman-Nixon conversation.

"I said, 'This is a pretty late date to be telling me something like that,'" Mr. Haig said.

When he reported this the next day to the President, he went on, Mr. Nixon was "almost incredulous that such a mistake could have been made."

The Watergate prosecution wants the tapes in an attempt to resolve who has been telling the truth about the break-in and the subsequent cover-up.

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Mr. Nixon told her Oct. 1 "not to worry" about the mistake because that conversation was not covered by the subpoena. She later modified her testimony somewhat by saying that she did not understand how she could have caused more than five minutes of the gap.

Today Mr. Haig backed up at least the first contention, saying that Mr. Nixon told him of Miss Woods's report shortly after she made it and informed him that the tape had not been subpoenaed.

Mr. Haig also said that he himself was told a few days earlier by one of the President's lawyers, J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., that the conversation in question was not covered by the special Watergate prosecution's subpoena of tapes and documents of nine Presidential conversations.

Discussion of Watergate

That subject arose Sept. 29, Mr. Haig said, when Miss Woods and Stephen B. Bull, a Presidential aide, were at Camp David, Md., preparing to play the subpoenaed tapes so that Miss Woods could type up summaries of the conversations on the tapes.

The disputed conversation is Mr. Nixon's discussion with H. R. Haldeman, his former chief of staff, on June 20, 1972, three days after the break-in at Democratic headquarters in the Watergate complex here. The 18-minute gap obliterates the only Watergate-related segment of the conversation, a sequence in which, according to Mr. Haldeman's notes of the meeting, Mr. Nixon ordered a "public relations" campaign to counteract the effect of the break-in.

The Haldeman notes, according to previous testimony, were found late in the day on Nov. 15. As Mr. Haig recounted it

in Federal District Court today, the discovery, through the notes, that "a portion of the gap included some discussion of Watergate was not a piece of news I accepted with tranquility."

It was also a piece of news that he had to relay immediately to the President, he said. And the President's reaction, as he recalled it, was to say, "We have to do whatever is technically feasible to reconstitute the tape, if that can be done."

Unpleasant Information

Mr. Haig repeated earlier testimony regarding the White House's queries to a technical expert about possible ways to reconstruct the tape. He did not offer any information and was not asked, however, about what other steps the White House took.

The next bit of unpleasant information that he had to relay to the President, Mr. Haig

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