

# Haig Tells of Tapes Gap Theory--A 'Sinister Force'

Washington

White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. said yesterday he and White House lawyers have discussed fears that "some sinister force" erased one of President Nixon's subpoenaed Watergate tapes.

Testifying in U.S. District Court, Haig told of what he called the "devil theories" about the controversial 18¼-minute gap in the recording, which has yet to be fully explained.

Haig said the fears were expressed at a White House meeting on the evening of November 20, the day before the President's lawyers reported the erasure to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica.

At that point, Haig said, the lawyers were convinced that President Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, could not have caused the two-toned humming noise that obliterated the tape for 18¼ minutes.

Miss Woods has testified that she might have caused a five-minute gap in the recording but, she insisted, no more than that.

The erasure obliterated a June 20, 1972, discussion of the Watergate break-in between the President and former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman. The 18¼-minute segment was drowned out by a long humming noise that drops noticeably in volume after the five-minute mark.

Haig said this was "a source of great distress" to White House lawyers.

As a result, he said, they discussed the possibility that "perhaps there had been one tone applied by Miss Woods . . . and then perhaps some sinister force had come in and applied the other energy source and taken care of the information on that tape."

Judge Sirica broke in and

asked Haig: "Has anyone ever suggested who that sinister force might be?"

Haig said, "No, your honor." He said he told the lawyers that they should first find out who had been given access to the recording.

White House records indicate that only Miss Woods and presidential assistant Stephen Bull were given the tape since it was subpoenaed in July. They got the recording September 29 after Mr. Nixon asked Miss Woods to summarize the

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highlights for him. Bull was told to help her.

Miss Woods said she might have caused a five-minute gap in the tape when she accidentally pushed the wrong button on a recording machine in her office on October 1, during the course of a phone call.

Haig made clear to newsmen after yesterday's hearing that he now thinks Miss Woods was responsible for the entire erasure—despite her testimony that the phone call lasted only about five minutes. She said she noticed her mistake as soon as she hung up the phone.

"I've known women who think they've talked for five minutes and then have talked for an hour," Haig said.

Miss Woods began reviewing the recording on September 29 at Camp David. At one point, she has said, Mr. Nixon came in for a few minutes and monitored a few excerpts, "pushing the buttons back and forth."

Haig was asked by reporters whether he had ever asked the President if he could have erased anything.

Haig, looking somewhat pained, shook his head negatively.

During his testimony, Mr. Nixon's chief of staff also admitted that White House

officials hesitated to disclose the 18¼-minute erasure when it was first discovered, partly because of fears of how it would look to the American public.

Haig recalled that the White House had already suffered a black eye, unfairly from his point of view, as a result of its earlier report to Judge Sirica that two other subpoenaed Watergate tape recordings never existed.

"We had just had two non-recordings, which was fairly traumatic from our perspective," Haig testified, "and it was important we not have a repeat of that kind of thing, which led to perceptions by the American

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people which I don't think were justified by the facts."

As a result, Haig said, White House lawyers were anxious to come up with an explanation for the erasure before marching over to Judge Sirica again. The attorneys, Haig said, were busy at the time working on a complete index of the subpoenaed recordings and related documents, and they wanted to find out if there were any "other discrepancies" that should be reported.

Haig said he first discovered that a discussion of the Watergate scandal itself had been erased after obtaining notes that Haldeman had jotted down at the June 20, 1972 meeting.

The notes were found in Haldeman's files at the Executive Office Building on the night of November 15, Haig said, but only after a phone call to Haldeman, who knew

the combination to the safe in which they were kept.

Under questioning by assistant Watergate special prosecutor Richard Benaviste, Haig insisted that Haldeman "does not influence what we do at the White House." Haig said he expressed "considerable chagrin" to former Haldeman aide Lawrence M. Higby "about not having the combination to that safe in the White House."

Haig said he was unaware that Higby had been told by Haldeman not to give the notes to current White House officials without first summarizing them over the phone to Haldeman.

The hearings were recessed indefinitely at the conclusion of Haig's testimony while audio experts jointly selected by the White House and Watergate prosecutors continue testing the suspect June 20 recording.

Sirica said he expects a report from the experts "sometime next week."

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