

Haig Says White House Suspected 'Sinister Force' Ruined Tape

By LESLEY OELSNER
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 6—Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., President Nixon's chief of staff, testified today that White House aides had suspected briefly that "some sinister force" had purposely caused the 18-minute gap on one of the subpoenaed Watergate tape recordings.

General Haig said that White House lawyers told him on Nov. 20 that the buzzing sound on the tape appeared to be caused by "some outside source of energy" and not by the malfunction of the tape recorder.

The segment of the conversation obliterated by the buzzing was the only part of the discussion related to Watergate, and so, General Haig said, there was some discussion in his meeting with the lawyers that "perhaps some sinister force had come in and applied the other energy source and taken care of the information on the tape."

Testifying before United States District Judge John J. Sirica, General Haig indicated that this view was only briefly held. And after his court appearance he said that he felt there was an innocent explanation for it all.

To waiting reporters he offered his own rationale: The alleged propensity of women to talk on the telephone for far longer periods than they either realize or admit.

He made clear that he thought Rose Mary Woods, the President's personal secretary, had caused the entire gap, and not just the four-and-a-half to five-minute segment that she contends she might have caused by accidentally pressing the wrong button on her tape re-

order when she was interrupted to take a brief telephone call. "I've known women that think they've talked for five minutes and then have talked an hour," said the President's aide, a career Army officer until he joined the Nixon Administration.

President Is Quoted

Miss Woods testified last week that she had been playing the disputed tape last Oct. 1 when the telephone in her office rang. She apparently pressed down the "record" button instead of the "stop" button while reaching for the phone, she said; she "must have" also left her foot on the recorder's foot pedal while she talked, she said.

She has repeatedly said she could not have been on the phone for more than five minutes.

But General Haig, in his testimony this morning, said that President Nixon had told him that Miss Woods had been "somewhat imprecise" about the accident when she recounted it later to Mr. Nixon. She had not been clear about whether she had caused the mistake by using the foot pedal or, instead, by pressing "buttons" on the recorder.

Richard Ben-Veniste, an assistant special Watergate prosecutor, asked General Haig whether he had heard any discussion about reasons for the "discrepancy" between the five-minute gap Miss Woods said she might have caused and the 18-minute gap that is now found on the tape.

The President's aide said that indeed he had — there were "several theories developed" at the White House, he said. One — which he attributed in part to "counsel" and which he said he "may have" discussed

with Mr. Nixon — was that Miss Woods was "tired and I couldn't remember how long she had been on the phone."

A second, he went on, saying it came from "several sources," was that Miss Woods might have erased the entire segment in a short time.

Mr. Ben-Veniste pressed on, asking whether there had been any thought that the gap was caused not by accident but instead on purpose.

"Yes," General Haig replied. "There's been discussion of what I've referred to as 'Devil theorists.'"

And then, after Mr. Ben-

Veniste had pointed out that there were two separate tones on the gap—one lasting about five minutes and the other, 13 minutes—General Haig described the theory of the "sinister force."

Access Discussed

"Anyone ever suggest who the sinister force could be?" Judge Sirica asked. No, the witness replied. He had simply told the lawyers that they must determine who had access to the tapes, he said, and it was then learned that only Miss Woods and Stephen Bull, a Presidential aide, had had access.

The cap obliterated a segment

"doing a great deal that week-

end," in addition, he said, the White House wanted to discover any other "discrepancies" in the subpoenaed tapes before going to court.

And then, referring to the White House announcements,

this fall that two of the nine subpoenaed tape recordings did not exist, he said: "We had just had two non-recordings, which was fairly traumatic from our perspective, and it was important we not have a repeat of that kind of thing, which led to perceptions completed next week."

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

The hearings were recessed indefinitely, pending examination by technical experts of the tape with the gap—an examination that is expected to be completed next week.

but Now Feels Miss Woods Is Blame