

Experts Testify Tape Gap
Caused by Manual Erasures

Machine's Floor Pedal Could Not Have Done It, Judge Sirica Is Told

Washington

Technical experts reported in federal court yesterday that the 18½-minute gap on one of President Nixon's Watergate tapes was the result of at least five separate erasures, all done manually.

They said that none of the erasures could have been caused by the floor pedal that Mr. Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, said she used.

The report strongly suggested that the obliteration was deliberate, but the experts were reluctant to put it in those words, especially in view of a stream

of objections from Mr. Nixon's lawyers.

"We have no idea when it occurred or who was responsible," one of the experts, computer scientist Thomas G. Stockham Jr., said in testifying about the obliterated segment. "But it occurred after the original tape was made."

The experts said that "magnetic signatures" or imprints they found on the tape showed that the buzzing sounds on the 18½-minute segment "were put on the tape in the process of erasing and re-recording at least five, and perhaps as many as nine separate and continuous segments."

According to the report, the Uher 5000 recording machine that Miss Woods said she used in monitoring the tape for the President last October was "almost surely" the one that was used "in producing the 18.5-minute section."

Beyond that, they said, "hand operation of keyboard controls on the Uher 5000 recorder was involved in starting and again in stopping the recording of each segment. The magnetic signatures observed on the tape show conclusively that the 18.5-minute section could not have been produced by any

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single, continuous operation."

Miss Woods had testified last fall that she might have caused a gap in the recording when she stretched around at her desk at the White House last October 1 to answer a five-minute phone call.

She said she accidentally pushed the "record" key on the machine instead of the "stop" key and must have kept her foot on the floor pedal while she was chatting.

The experts said it couldn't have happened that way. They said the magnetic imprints detected in at least five points on the tape had to have been caused by the pressing of keys on the recording machine each and every time.

"With the hand?" U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica interrupted at one point during the testimony.

"With a hand. Or with a stick," Stockham replied.

"But not a foot pedal?" the judge asked.

"Not with a foot pedal," Stockham assured him.

The findings were immediately contested by White House lawyers at the courtroom hearing Sirica convened to begin airing the report.

Making his debut as Mr.

Nixon's chief courtroom advocate, White House special counsel James D. St. Clair objected repeatedly and successfully to attempts to get the experts to state flatly whether they thought the erasures were "deliberate" or "accidental." The experts said any speech that had been on the tape cannot be recovered.

The recording, one of nine subpoenaed by the Special Watergate prosecutor, was of a conversation between Mr. Nixon and H.R. Haldeman on June 20, 1972 — three days after the break-in at Democratic party headquarters.

The 18½ - minute gap, showing as a loud buzz, apparently obliterated the conversation about Watergate that took place at that time, according to Haldeman's notes.

The experts said they came to their conclusions on the erasure by the appearance of "signatures" — magnetic marks left on the tape when the erase head lifts off.

Thomas G. Stockham, a professor of computer science at the University of Utah, was asked whether it was likely the marks "were caused accidentally or inadvertently."

St. Clair objected that Stockham was not qualified to reply.

"Suppose someone listening to the tape with no intention to erase the obliterated section," asked assistant prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste. "Is it likely . . . that five stops and starts could have been accidentally made without the person listening to the tape knowing that occurred?"

Again St. Clair objected and the question went unanswered.

Even Sirica ran into St. Clair's objections when he asked "can you say with any degree of certainty . . . whether it was caused by accident or deliberately done?"

Eventually the judge will decide on any further action to be taken in the case. He has the option of turning the matter over to a grand jury.

"We have no view who did

what for what reason," said another expert, Richard Bolt, a former professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who now heads his own research firm.

After the hearing, Ben-Veniste was asked whether he will pursue the question of whether the erasure was deliberate when the experts return to court Friday.

Washington Post

KEY TO BUZZ SECTION IN WHITE HOUSE TAPE OF JUNE 20, 1972

SYMBOLS:

- ▼ ERASE-RECORD ON
- ▲ ERASE-RECORD OFF
- ERASE-RECORD ON AND OFF
- ~~~~~ SHORT SEGMENT OF SPEECH-LIKE SOUND UNDER BUZZ
- START/STOP CLICK WITHIN BUZZ
- * ERASE-HEAD-OFF SIGNATURE OF UHER 5000
- (*) ERASE-HEAD-OFF SIGNATURE PARTIALLY ERASED
- ▭ SEGMENT WITH UNCERTAIN ENDING

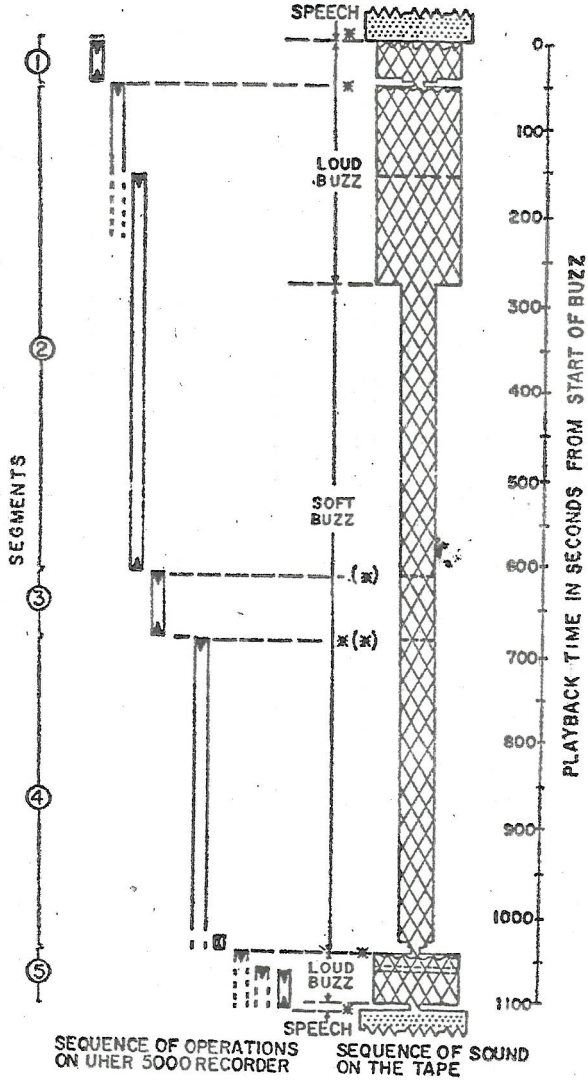


Diagram of Gap

This diagram of the 18½-minute gap on one of President Nixon's Watergate tapes was

prepared for Judge John J. Sirica by a team of technical experts.