

Odyssey of June 20 Tape

Never Strayed Far From White House Eyes

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The odyssey of the June 20 Watergate tape, by all accounts, never stretched beyond the ward of the President or his trusted advisers.

It went as far as Camp David, Md., and back to the White House and even, for a time, was entrusted in the hands of officials of the National Security Agency.

Rose Mary Woods, the President's personal secretary, labored over it while attempting to transcribe 30 hours of recordings, and other White House aides kept it in safekeeping.

But, at no time did it stray from the sight of its White House keepers, other than when it was locked securely in a vault, according to sworn testimony by Mr. Nixon's assistants, and to documents presented to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica.

Yet, inexplicably, according to a panel of court-appointed acoustics experts, an

18½-minute segment of the tape was obliterated by at least five separate hand motions on a tape recorder.

Gone from the tape is a conversation between the President and White House Chief of Staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman three days after the Watergate break-in, a conversation that prosecutors regard as crucial to determining when the President first learned of the cover-up of the scandal.

If the White House statements given to the court so far withstand the test of further scrutiny, then the court may look for an explanation before July 18, the date when presidential assistants began keeping a day-by-day log of the whereabouts of the tapes.

Before that time, the Secret Service maintained sketchy records of the tapes' travel, sometimes noting sign-outs on brown wrapping paper.

Haldeman testified before the Senate Select Committee that he took several tapes home overnight between July 9 and

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11, but he could recall the date of only one.

That was a Sept. 15, 1972, post-Watergate meeting in the White House, Haldeman said, and Mr. Nixon had asked him to listen to it because the President's recollections of the meeting differed from testimony by fired counsel John W. Dean, III.

Haldeman said no serious questions were raised about his taking the tapes home because it was not even generally known then that the recordings existed. It was not until July 16 that former White House aide Alexander P. Butterfield publicly disclosed that several rooms in the White House had been secretly bugged at the President's request.

Since then, examination of Secret Service records by the court has turned up no evidence that Haldeman took the June 20 tape.

The June 20 recording is considered by the Special Watergate Prosecutor's Office to be important because it involved a meeting of the President and Haldeman just three days after the Watergate break-in. Earlier in the day, according to Senate testimony, Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, another presidential adviser, had met with Dean, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and then Attorney General Richard G. Kleindeinst.

According to former Spe-

cial Prosecutor Archibald Cox, the tape "should show the extent of the knowledge of the illegal activity by the participants" at the meeting, or "any effort to conceal the truth."

The only comprehensive daily journal of the movements of various White House tapes is a two-page ledger submitted to Judge Sirica early last December by White House Counsel J. Fred Buzhardt.

The document, compiled by White House aide John Bennett, describes the June 20 recording as "E.O.B.—Start 6/12/72." That is the date that the tape in question began recording conversations in Mr. Nixon's office suite in the Executive Office Building.

Bennett said the tapes were turned over to him by the Secret Service last July 18, and that none of the recordings was removed from his vault until last Sept. 28. The summary Sirica received covers check-ins and check-outs from Sept. 28 to Dec. 3.

According to the log, Bennett removed the June 20 tape from his vault last Sept. 28 in preparation for giving it to White House aide Stephen Bull the next day.

Testimony indicated that Bull had this and other tapes transported to the presidential retreat at Camp David, where Mr. Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, was to attempt to transcribe them.

Miss Woods testified that she worked on the June 20

tape throughout the weekend of Sept. 29, but she said she attempted only to transcribe a conversation between the President and Ehrlichman that preceded the conversation between Haldeman and Mr. Nixon.

At one point while she was working on the transcription, Miss Woods said, the President came into her cabin and pushed the buttons of the tape recorder several times to listen to parts of the tape.

She testified that she never listened to the June 20 Haldeman conversation at Camp David because White House attorneys had concluded that the conversation was not one of those subpoenaed by the prosecutors.

It was not until Oct. 1, Miss Woods testified, that she listened to the June 20 Haldeman conversation with the President. It was then, she said, that she accidentally pressed the "record" button of her Uher 5000 recorder while answering a telephone, thereby obliterating a segment of the tape.

According to Bennett's log, the next movement of the controversial tape occurred on Nov. 13, when he took the tape to technicians of the National Security Agency to make copies. Bennett said the two copies were made in his presence,

and that the original was never out of his sight.

The original, Bennett said, was sealed in a box on Nov. 14 and on Nov. 26 was handed to Buzhardt for delivery to U.S. District Court. It was kept under guard in a safe in the court house until six U.S. marshals took it by train to New York for testing by the panel of court-appointed experts.

The first copy, Bennett's log shows, was signed over to Buzhardt on Nov. 14. The second copy was kept in a White House safe until Nov. 29, when it was sent to Sirica, Bennett said.

The whereabouts of the copies, however, may be a moot question, because the panel of acoustical experts concluded yesterday that the tape they examined is an original.

The net claim of Bennett's detailed summary is that only Miss Woods and Bull had possession of the June 20 tape out of the eyesight of either Bennett or presidential attorneys after last July 18.