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... Heading for a Collision With the White House

After separate secret previews of the technical experts report on the famous 18-minute buzz, the special prosecutor's office and President Nixon's lawyers moved off on separate tracks likely to converge in historic confrontation.

Purged of any possible doubt, Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski immediately determined that the matter of the erased Watergate conversation between Mr. Nixon and H. R. Halde- man on June 20, 1972 (three days after the burglary) could not be ignored. Whether Judge John Sirica were to order it or not, Jaworski decided to

go to the Watergate grand jury to find the truth and probably seek indictments.

But at the same time in the White House, the findings of the experts, demolishing previous explanations by presidential aides, were not allowed to interfere with the new Nixon hard line on Watergate. Instead, prominent Republicans were encouraged to issue broadsides against the President's critics without getting informed of the findings by the technical experts.

The collision course set by these two lines is obvious. While Jaworski's prosecutors are seeking to place responsibility for tape tampering within the White House, Mr. Nixon's lieutenants are admitting nothing, revealing little and counterpunching vigorously. That collision, even some Nixon stalwarts now believe, could lead to impeachment.

The shocking report of the technical experts was no surprise to either the prosecutors or the White House. Each side had been given progress reports by the experts, including information weeks ago that it was possible to discover "fingerprints" on the tape left by the Uher recording machine. Around the time Boston lawyer James D. St. Clair was hired to lead Mr. Nixon's defense, it was obvious that the experts' report would be bad news for the White House.

Within the last week, it had become clear that the matter would end up

in the grand jury—either at Sirica's order or by Jaworski's insistence. What's more, the grand jury would probe not only possible perjury in earlier hearings before Sirica on the lost 18 minutes but who pushed the buttons on the Uher machine and, most important, who ordered the buttons pushed.

The President's lawyers had two possible responses. They could express their own shock and pledge an attempt to find the culprit. Or, they could issue a hard-nosed lawyer's challenge to Jaworski: Prove what you can, but we'll fight you every step.

All steps point to the latter course. The immediate response in open court to the experts' report were objections by St. Clair to questioning of the experts by the prosecutors. A possible strategy: break down their credibility.

Even more revealing was White House encouragement of strong counterattack speeches by two Republicans enjoying wide popular respect, Vice President Gerald Ford and Sen. Barry Goldwater, after learning of the technicians' findings. Both attacked the President's enemies Tuesday, the day of the experts' report, in language closely — and surprisingly — mirroring the present White House line. Goldwater was definitely unaware and Ford was probably unaware of the bombshell to be exploded in Sirica's court.

To fight back in the teeth of

adversity is the line long urged by some presidential advisers and also most conducive to Mr. Nixon's own instincts. But other, more senior aides at the White House are grim. One aide who learned of the report only Tuesday called it "really tough, damnite." Another aide, who had known of the report for some time, called it "bad news, very bad news for us."

Indeed, the report stunned many Republican congressmen who had begun to feel President Nixon might conceivably be on the upswing. Several Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee, about to begin impeachment proceedings, now fear the worst.

What lies ahead when Jaworski's lawyers go to the grand jury is unknown. Previous testimony indicates the erased tape was handled only by presidential aides John Bennett, Steve Bull and Rose Mary Woods plus the President himself. But Mr. Nixon listened to the tape only at Camp David, where there was no Uher tape recording machine, according to testimony.

So, with hard evidence now in hand that the tape was adulterated, the tougher questions remain of when, where and by whom the deed was done. Jaworski is intent on getting the answers. That the President's lawyers seem ready to fight him at very step is scarcely reassuring to worried Republicans both on Capitol Hill and in the White House itself.

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