

White House Denies Nixon Erased Part of Key Tape

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The White House denied today that President Nixon had personally erased part of a key Watergate tape, but otherwise refused to discuss yesterday's testimony by technical experts suggesting that the tape may have been tampered with.

In a statement, the White House noted that the Federal court hearing on the report by the technical advisory committee, which involved an 18½-minute gap in a White House tape recording of June 20, 1971, had not yet been concluded and that other testimony concerning the tape was still to be heard.

The statement went on to say that "further discussion would be improper while this matter is in court." The White House press secretary, Gerald L. Warren, told reporters at the regular morning briefing that he could make no comment on the tape issue other than to refer them to the statement.

But, after being asked by a reporter whether Mr. Nixon had erased the tapes, Mr. Warren replied, "No."

Later he elaborated slightly, saying that his "No" included both deliberate and accidental erasures of the tape by the President.

Asked how he knew, Mr. Warren replied that "there have been many discussions about this matter" in which he had participated.

But otherwise Mr. Warren sought to turn aside unanswered a storm of questions about the tape erasures hurled at him in the crowded White House briefing room.

The strategy of silence adopted toward the White House tape today indicated that the White House may have been thrust back on the defensive just as it was opening what appeared to be a planned, concerted counterattack against those seeking the impeachment of President Nixon.

Mr. Warren acknowledged today that a speech made yesterday by Vice President Ford assailing "extreme partisans" who he said were out to "crush" the President, was drafted with the assistance of Mr. Nixon's speech writers. Yesterday Mr. Warren gave reporters the impression that the President's staff had had no role in the Vice President's speech.

Concession by Ford

Mr. Ford himself conceded today that his speech had been drafted by the White House speech writers, but added that he had provided the ideas. He said that he did not have a staff of speech writers.

However, other White House and Administration officials have been speaking recently of actively opposing those seeking to impeach President Nixon.

Bryce N. Harlow, counselor to the President, remarked to a newsman a few days ago that "a highly organized opposition" was lobbying to put the President out of office. Mr. Harlow said that to prevent the President's opponents from succeeding, Mr. Nixon's associates "need to do something other than just sit there and blink."

He suggested that the President's supporters must counteract the lobbying on their own.

The new Attorney General,

William B. Saxbe, spoke in a similar vein when he told reporters earlier this week that there were 200 lawyers on Capitol Hill who were out to get the President. Mr. Saxbe implied, although he did not say so in so many words, that the President needed and was entitled to a defense against this assault.

However, the tactic of aggressive counterattack against those seeking the President's impeachment — by excoriating them as political partisans — may have received a major setback by the late tape disclosure, judging by today's White House response.

Testimony by Panel

The panel of experts testified yesterday that parts of the 18½-minute gap in the tape in question had been erased at least five and possibly as many as nine times. Because that part of the tape recorded a conversation between the President and H. R. Haldeman, one of his top aides then, about the Watergate burglary, the testimony raised the question of possible tampering.

Today, the White House sought to avoid the question raised by the tape testimony rather than confront it directly. Mr. Warren did his best to remain silent on the tape beyond referring to the short statement issued in print.

For nearly an hour, he replied to insistent questions, by reiterating "you have the statement, Gene;" "You have the statement, Jerry;" "Ladies and gentlemen, I respectfully submit that I am not going to respond to your questions," "I am going to tell you one more time — I am not going to get into this matter with you."

However, Mr. Warren, who

maintained his composure in the face of often heated questions, did let slip a few replies, including his assertion that President Nixon did not erase the tape.

He conceded, for example, that the White House did, in fact, participate in the selection of the panel of experts that reported on the tape. Yesterday, after the experts testified, President Nixon's latest attorney, James St. Clair, said that he was going to talk to his "own experts." The implication seemed to be that the experts giving the testimony were not those selected by the White House.

When asked about whether other White House experts would be selected to examine the tape, Mr. Warren replied today that "I know of no experts in the employ" of the White House.

He also said that "There has been a great deal of testimony [on the tapes issue] before Judge Sirica, and there will be a great deal more."

Today, meanwhile, Vice President Ford, while still insisting that there is a "massive effort to crush the President," seemed to be back on the defensive on the impeachment issue because of the new tape disclosure.

Speaking to newsmen following a speech to the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives at the Washington Hilton Hotel, Mr. Ford warned against "premature judgments" with regard to the tape disclosure, saying that the American people were reserving judgment until the hearing ended.

But then Mr. Ford added that "even if you take the worst side," of the disclosure of the tape erasures, "it doesn't justify impeachment."