

White House Vows to Aid Tape Probe

Washington

The White House promised yesterday to "cooperate totally" with the FBI's inquiry into the erasure of a crucial 18½ minute segment of a Watergate tape recording.

The pledge came from the President's deputy press secretary, Gerald L. Warren, as FBI agents — ordered into action by the special Watergate prosecutor — interviewed White House staff members about the circumstances surrounding the erasure.

Leon Jaworski, the special prosecutor, ordered the FBI investigation after a court-appointed panel of six technical experts reported Monday that the 18½ minute gap was caused by at least five separate erasures and re-recordings, and not by the single accidental pressing of a wrong button on a tape recorder, as the White House had suggested.

Warren refused to say whether the White House considers the FBI investigation necessary. Nor would he answer a question of how Mr. Nixon would respond to a request by the FBI to interview him personally.

He said, however, that Mr. Nixon had discussed the panel's report with his chief of staff, General Alexander M. Haig, and his press spokesman, Ronald L. Ziegler.

"He wants to get to the bottom of the situation," Warren said.

Chief Judge John J. Sirica of the U.S. District Court continued yesterday to press his own inquiry into the 18½-minute gap, taking testimony from two Secret Service agents assigned to the White House — and, in the process, informing the White House counsel that it had no right to be present when the lawyers from the special Watergate prosecution interview Secret Service mem-

bers.

One of the agents, Raymond C. Zumwalt, provided new insights yesterday

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about the apprehensive mood at the White House.

He testified that last November, four months after the White House taping system had been disconnected in the wake of public disclosure of the system, the Secret Service had cut the wires leading to the microphones that were a part of the system and had been left in their original locations.

The wires were cut in case some one at the White House could somehow have used the microphones to pick up presidential conversations, he said.

"It is just not very good policy to have a hot microphone in the office," Zumwalt said.

Zumwalt said in his testimony that "we have a countermeasure section which pulls periodic audio checks on the various offices.

White House lawyers said later that the Secret Service was simply concerned that "Someone in the White House might somehow be able to pick up conversations from the recorders unless the wires were cut."

Under questioning by assistant special prosecutor Richard Ben Veniste, Zumwalt told the court that the cutting of the wires had taken place after Judge Sirica had begun holding his hearings into the Watergate tape recordings.

Ben-Veniste declined later to say whether he considered this action improper. However, in view of the fact that an inquiry into the non-existence or erasure of tapes might require inspection of the taping system it is considered possible that alteration of the system during the course of the hearing could be considered improper.

Ben-Veniste elicited another disclosure from Zumwalt — the disclosure that at least some persons at the White House had realized as soon as the Watergate breakin occurred that the taping system might have

some significance in the days to come.

Under questioning by the prosecutor, Zumwalt said that the Secret Service had discussed as long ago as 1971 the possibility that the White House taping system could be improved. The service had even started a project in July 1971, that was designed to improve the system, he said.

Then, having apparently read an internal Secret Service report on the subject, Ben-Veniste posed this question: Did the witness recall telling a Secret Service inspector that "when the Watergate breakin was exposed, this project was put on a hold basis and never used?"

Zumwalt said "Yes."

Zumwalt also admitted that his records on who had received and returned presidential tapes had no documentation as to when two batches of recordings were returned.

Ben-Veniste pointed to Zumwalt's notation that presidential aide Stephen B. Bull received tapes on July 10, 1973. Bull had turned those tapes over to former presidential aide H.R. Haldeman.

Then Ben-Veniste asked Zumwalt to document the notation that Bull had returned the tapes two days later.

"It's not indicated on here," Zumwalt said.

"Can you tell us how you know?" Ben-Veniste asked.

"I probably just remembered it, that would be my guess," Zumwalt answered.

New York Times

From NYT version, at this point: "Mr. Ben-Veniste did not follow up the matter."

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