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Nixon Memory 'Blank Spots'

Recollections on tape have gaps

WASHINGTON (UPI) — President Nixon's personally recorded recollections of two of his Watergate conversations, surrendered under subpoenas, have blank spots in midsentence, federal court testimony indicated today.

Assistant Watergate special prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste disclosed existence of the blank spaces in questioning White House counsel J. Fred Buzhardt at a hearing on the tapes before U. S. District Judge John J. Sirica.

Ben-Veniste disclosed — and Buzhardt confirmed — that a cassette recording of Nixon's dictated recollections of a meeting he had March 21, 1973, with John W. Dean III, his counsel at the time, ended in midsentence and was followed by 57 seconds of silence.

Buzhardt also testified that a dictated recollection by Nixon of a telephone call he made to former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, then his campaign manager, on the evening of June 20, 1972, contained a 38-second blank space before it again picked up the President's voice in mid-sentence.

Sirica's court was jammed with a standing room only crowd for the hearing.

Asked by Ben-Veniste why blank spots appeared in the tapes, Buzhardt replied that "frequently, dictation may not be in the form of complete sentences."

The court hearing resulted from a report by some technical experts earlier this week that a tape of a Nixon conversation three days after the Watergate break-in had a gap that was caused by a series of manual manipulations of a tape recorder.

The Watergate special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, said today it "would be very difficult" to conclude that the erasure was caused accidentally, and that this was the reason he asked for FBI for an exhaustive investigation.

Jaworski said that the technicians' report "conceivably" would suggest criminal destruction of evidence at the White House.

Jaworski said that if the FBI investigation indicates that the President himself might have information pertinent to determining how the 18½-minute tape gap was caused, then the President would be asked to "let us have that information."

