

## investigations

## Tape 'Repeatedly' Erased

NO MORE bombshells in the Watergate matter had turned out to be an unkeepable promise by President Nixon. The most recent exploded in Washington last Tuesday, with a report by a half-dozen technical experts, appointed by U.S. District Judge John Sirica, on the controversial tape of June 20, 1972, recording a conversation between the President and his aide H. R. Haldeman.

Late in November presidential secretary Rose Mary Woods had testified that she might have caused at least part of an 18-minute gap in that recording when, in the midst of monitoring and transcribing the tape, on October 1, she had stretched around at her desk to answer a five-minute telephone call. She said she had accidentally pushed the "record" button of the recording machine, a Uhler 5000, and must have simultaneously kept her foot on the machine's floor pedal while on the telephone, thus obliterating an expanse of taped conversation.

#### Six Experts

The tape itself was one of nine subpoenaed by the special Watergate prosecutor. It was of particular interest to Watergate investigators because the Haldeman-Nixon conversation on it had occurred on the first working day following the weekend Watergate break-in of June 17, 1972, and hence presumably would have touched on that event.

Haldeman's own notes of the discussion had indicated as much. But the tape itself, after a few minutes of casual talk about a trip to the

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West, deteriorated into "a constant hum," as White House lawyers described it, for 18½ minutes. The remaining portion, said the lawyers, had nothing to do with the Watergate scandal.

Except for presidential aide Alexander Haig's flip-pant suggestion of "sinister forces," White House spokesmen, including counsel Fred Buzhardt, had gone along with Miss Woods' theory. Judge Sirica had or-

### The missing 18 minutes had been erased by hand

dered originals of all the subpoenaed tapes placed in the custody of the court "in the interest of seeing that nothing else happens to them." Later he had asked for the expert technical study of the missing 18 minutes.

The six experts, in their report last week, said the 18½ minute gap was the result of at least five separate and contiguous erasures, each of which would have had to be made separately "by hand control." They explained that "magnetic signatures," or imprints, on the tape showed the 18 minutes of buzzing had been "put on the tape in the process of erasing and re-recording at least five, and perhaps as

many as nine" separate segments.

According to the experts' unanimous report, erasure of each segment would have required starting and stopping the machine by hand each time: "The magnetic signatures . . . show conclusively that the 18.5-minute section could not have been produced by any single, continuous operation." Although the "erased portion of the tape probably contained speech originally," said the report, "recovery of the speech is not possible by any method known to us."

#### White House Objections

"We have no idea when (the erasure) occurred or who was responsible," testified computer scientist Thomas Stockham Jr., a University of Utah professor who was one of the experts. "But it occurred after the original tape was made." Under Judge Sirica's questioning, Stockham declared the erasures could have been made "with a hand, or with a stick . . . (but) not with a foot pedal."

None of the experts was willing to speculate on whether the obliteration had been deliberate, and White House special counsel James St. Clair repeatedly and successfully objected to attempts by the prosecution — and by Sirica himself — to elicit an opinion. "We have no idea who did what for what reason," said another expert, former Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Richard Bolt.

After the hearing St. Clair was overheard telling Bolt that the White House might summon its own experts —



A. P. photo

ROSE MARY WOODS



A. P. photo

H. R. HALDEMAN

at which Bolt snapped: "I thought we were your experts."

Watergate prosecutor Leon Jaworski had told reporters last weekend he would "conduct whatever investigation is necessary" after the experts' report had been received and studied. Eventually Judge Sirica would decide on any further action to be taken in the case; he had the option of turning it over to a grand jury.

The White House refrained from immediate comment on the new development as "altogether immature and improper at this time," while the matter was still before the court. Any comment, said White House counsel Buzhardt, would only create further confusion in the public mind.

Other Republican comment ranged from Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater's "inconsequential" to Tennessee Senator Howard Baker's "dismay." At the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco Wednesday, former Attorney General Elliot Richardson called the situation "distressing" and "worrisome," and suggested "abuse of power" should be a ground for presidential impeachment.