

Drawings by David Gunderson

Editor's note: The report of an expert panel to Chief United States District Judge John J. Sirica that 18½ minutes of a June 20, 1972 tape recording of a conversation between President Nixon and White House chief of staff H.R. Haldeman showed signs of at least five erasures has touched off speculation about who erased the tape.

When Rep. John B. Anderson (R-Ill.) heard of the panel's report, he remarked, "Sherlock Holmes has solved a lot tougher cases than that, either by induction or deduction." Unfortunately, Sherlock Holmes is apparently under contract to Time Magazine. (See Time, Feb. 4, 1973). The only other detective equal to the task is Nero Wolfe. The writer is a great admirer of Wolfe and his creator, Rex Stout; what follows is his account of how Wolfe's assistant, Archie Goodwin, might describe Wolfe's solution of the mystery.

I had been out dancing with Lily Rowan the night before so I got considerably less than the eight hours sleep I need to function at my peak. I had finished the griddle cakes Fritz had made and was on my second cup of coffee when Fritz came down and told me Wolfe wanted to see me right away.

When I came into his room, Wolfe, all one-seventh of a ton of him, was propped up in bed, wearing about two acres of yellow pajamas, digging into the Georgia ham and eggs *au beurre noir* that Fritz had brought up on the tray.

"You've seen the morning papers, Archie?" Wolfe asked.

I said that I had.

"I want them here, tonight."

"Who's that?" I asked Wolfe.

"Come, come, Archie," Wolfe said,

The writer is on the metropolitan staff of *The Washington Post*.

"we don't have time for humor. I want them here tonight."

"You don't mean . . ." For the first time since Wolfe had disappeared during the Arnold Zeck adventure and then reappeared in disguise I was speechless. He and I were both looking at the front-page picture of the President standing in the Rose Garden with his secretary and his aides. "You want them? Here?"

"Tonight," Wolfe said.

"But . . ." I started.

"Tonight, Archie. And get me Saul, Orrie and Fred. I want to see them when I come down from the plant room this morning. Tell Fritz there will be four for lunch. I have some things for you to do, so you won't be here."

I gritted my teeth. Fritz was making chicken livers and tomato halves fried in oil with chopped parsley, rice cakes and honey and I wanted to be there. Wolfe gave me my instructions and I got busy. When he's in that kind of a mood, there's no point arguing.

Don't ask me how I did it because I'm not sure myself. It took a lot of doing, but by the time Wolfe was due down from the plant room, I had completed my chores. I was typing a report when I heard the elevator coming down. It was 6 o'clock.

I waited until he had lowered himself into his chair to give him the details. When I finished, he leaned back and said, "Satisfactory," and rang for Fritz to bring him some beer.

I watched while he finished the first glass in five gulps and licked the foam from his lip, opened the desk drawer and counted the bottle caps. "Be careful not to kick the desk," I told him. "That's where I put the bug. It wouldn't look too good if it dropped out right in the middle of things."

Wolfe grunted. I'm not sure if it was a sign of displeasure for the evening ahead, of his distaste for machines in general or just a grunt.

By 9 o'clock, after a dinner of shad roe *aux fines herbes*, duckling roasted in cider, bread triangles fried in anchovy butter and corn cakes, we were all set. Saul, Orrie and Fred—whom Wolfe employs from time to time—were there. Saul had taken the seat at my desk, Fred and Orrie were in their positions in the room and Wolfe was reading "The Making of the President 1972."

When the doorbell rang, I went. He was flanked by two husky, clean-cut G-men who were sporting plastic ear plugs. For a minute I wasn't sure whether I should salute or shake his hand. I settled on taking his coat, but the G-man beat me to it. His secretary, Miss Woods, the two ex-generals, Haig

and Bennett, the former chief of staff, Haldeman, the appointments secretary, Bull and the lawyer, Buzhardt, followed him in.

I let Fritz take care of their coats while I showed the President to the big red chair at the corner of Wolfe's desk. Saul, Orrie and Fred jumped to their feet. Wolfe half rose out of his chair which for him was a sign of respect considering the effort it takes.

While the President tried without much success to engage Wolfe in some small talk about the Super Bowl, I placed Miss Woods in the yellow chair next to the President. I let the others fend for themselves. The two G-men stood against the wall, watching everything that moved.

After making all the introductions, I made my excuses, explaining that I had an errand to run. I calmly walked down the street to Doc Vollmer's, went through his house and came in through our back door. It took me just under two minutes and I was puffing a little. I positioned myself by the cut-out portion of the wall covered by the picture of the waterfall, so I had a clear view of the room. The President was still talking about the Super Bowl.

Wolfe cleared his throat, which was my signal to start the tape recorder. "Mr. Goodwin promised not to detain you too long from the affairs of state, Mr. President," Wolfe said, "so we had better get straight to the point. I asked you all here tonight because I think I can settle the matter of who erased the tape. The perpetrator is, of course, among us."

At that point, Haig jumped up and started to say something about a "sinister force," but Wolfe cut him off.

"Flummery, sir. The day of believing in witchcraft and demons is gone. We know better than that. The tape was erased by flesh and blood. Now then, Mr. President, would you mind turning over the tape Mr. Goodwin asked you to bring?"

"As you know, Mr. Wolfe," the President answered, "I have consistently adhered to the position that

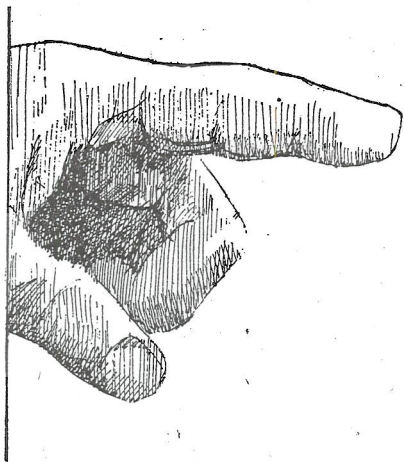


these tapes are protected by executive privilege. To reveal their contents to you would undermine the confidentiality that any President must enjoy in dealing with his aides if he is to function as the President. Therefore, I must regretfully—and respectfully—decline your request. I'm not being critical. I'm not angry at you for asking. That's your job. And I respect you for that. But you must understand that I have a constitutional and historical function to consider."

I could see Wolfe stiffening as the President spoke, but Wolfe controlled his temper.

"I anticipated your response," Wolfe said. "The tape would be helpful, but it is not essential. I can settle the matter without it."

Wolfe usually doesn't like women, and I could see from the tone that he took with Miss Woods that she wasn't going to be an exception. She wasn't exactly going out of her way for him either.



"Miss Woods," Wolfe said, "you testified during your first court appearance that you had been careful in transcribing the tapes not to erase them. I believe you said, 'I used my head. The only one I had to use.'"

"That's right," she snapped. "I said that. At the time I gave that testimony I thought they were interested only in the tapes that had been subpoenaed. As I understood it, the portion I was dealing with was not."

"At least that is your story," Wolfe replied, wiggling his finger at her, "but I must assume that you are an efficient, careful secretary, or Mr. Nixon would not have kept you with him for . . ."

"Twenty-three years," she shot back.

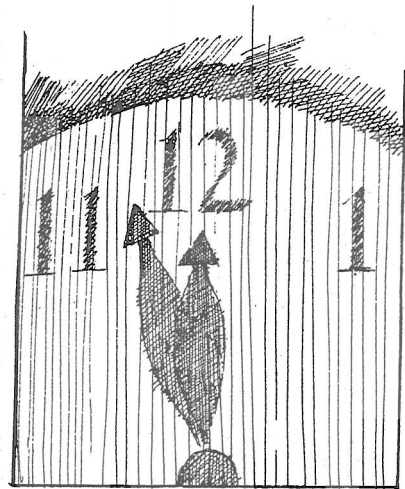
"Indeed, madam. And it strains the imagination that you would have lasted that long if you had made hare-brained mistakes along the way. I will not ask you to tell us again how you think you erased a portion of that tape accidentally. I am content with the report of the experts that it was done manually and not with the foot pedal, as you testified in court. I don't mind saying that your description of how you answered the phone and kept your foot on the pedal throughout the

conversation struck me as demonstrating remarkable dexterity and ability to endure discomfort."

She started to say something, but Wolfe had turned to Haldeman. "If my memory serves me correctly, Mr. Haldeman, you testified last summer that you employed something called a 'zero defect system' while you were in charge of the White House staff." Wolfe said the words as though he were picking up an oily rag from the Shirvan rug in front of his desk.

"That's right," Haldeman replied, showing a nice set of white teeth. "We were intent on eliminating mistakes."

"I am interested in the laxity with which the tapes were circulated and returned. Apparently you were not so



concerned about eliminating mistakes to insist that the Secret Service keep careful records when the tapes were removed from their custody. One more point interests me. Why was it that Miss Woods' recording machine was rendered incapable of recording or erasing only after this tape had suffered the erasure? Prudence would have dictated the utmost care and precaution in handling this tape and that would mean that a copy of the tape would have been made before Miss Woods began her transcribing."

By this time no one was moving. Saul, who is more observant than any camera, was busy taking mental pictures of every expression in the room.

"One would have to be witless not to comprehend who benefitted from the erasure," Wolfe said after a moment's silence. "But that observation does not necessarily solve our mystery. We must weigh motivations—loyalty, jealousy, revenge, fear—and then, to borrow from the sports vernacular you like so well, Mr. President, we will know what the score is.

"Obviously," Wolfe continued, "whoever is responsible for erasing the tape is someone with a feeling of either great loyalty or hostility to the President, since the President would be the center of attention in this affair.

"If it were someone disloyal to the President, it seems unlikely—considering the public outcry that could have been expected—that the person would have taken it upon himself or herself to act without the President's knowledge and approval.

"If it were someone disloyal to the President—Gen. Haig's 'sinister force'—then that person could have foreseen with relish that the public's reaction would be extreme when it learned of the erasure. But your official position has been that you assumed until quite recently that the erased portion was not covered by any subpoena. Therefore, by your reasoning a disloyal person could not have known that he or she was destroying material evidence."

With that, Wolfe leaned back in his chair, his fingers pressed together. I couldn't see his face from where I was watching, but I knew what he was doing. He had closed his eyes, shutting out any distraction from the work that was going on in his head. And he was pushing his lips in and out.

I didn't wait for him to open his eyes. I started moving toward the room. I finally knew what Wolfe was thinking and I could see that Saul did, too, because he was starting to get up from his chair. I wanted to be in the room when the person Wolfe fingered sprang up. I got there just in time.

Editor's note: At Mr. Wolfe's direction, Mr. Goodwin has declined to make public the final portion of his report concerning the erased tape. Mr. Goodwin informs us that Mr. Wolfe is prepared, however, to make his findings known to the Special Watergate Prosecutor.