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The Tapes: Hard Questions for Mr. Nixon

White House lawyers are disappointed and exasperated with the technical expert they hired to study the famous 18½ minute tape erasure, a fact likely to further deepen President Nixon's difficulties in the House impeachment inquiry.

Nixon lawyer James St. Clair's irritation with Dr. Michael Hecker, the West Coast technician retained by the White House two months ago, has become obvious in recent weeks. That strongly suggests that Hecker's findings will not be far from the verdict of the court-appointed experts: the gap in the vital June 20, 1972, Oval Office conversation could not have been accidental.

The erased 18½ minutes, forgotten of late but not gone, will again plague Mr. Nixon when the experts submit technical findings to Judge John Sirica. If the White House cannot produce expert rebuttal, the President will inevitably be called on to personally explain the gap for the first time. Indeed, members of the House Judiciary Committee are determined to pursue the sensitive question of Mr. Nixon's connection with the tape erasure.

Once the court's panel of experts released its Jan. 15 preliminary report knocking down an accidental erasure, the White House went shopping for its own expert. The choice was Dr. Hecker, a senior research engineer at the Stanford (Calif.) Research Insti-

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tute. If a scientist of his standing would refute the other experts, the erased tape would drop from the President's massive load of problems.

But St. Clair has grown as unhappy with Hecker as he has been with the court-appointed experts. That raises the probability that when the experts produce their detailed findings, perhaps next week, the White House will have no scientific refutation.

The matter will then be in the hands of federal grand jury no. 3. Although the grand jury might indict presidential secretary Rose Mary Woods, its more likely course will be no action. Rather, the technical report will generate long-delayed attempts to get Mr. Nixon's version.

According to Secret Service logs, only three persons—the President, Miss Woods and presidential aide Steve Bull—handled the June 20 tape. Both Miss Woods and Bull have sworn they played no part in erasing a portion of Mr. Nixon's conversation with H. R. Haldeman on June 20, the first

working day after the Watergate burglary.

If Mr. Nixon had granted the grand jury request early this year for him to testify, he would have been questioned in depth about the erasure. What explanation could he give? Did he give the tapes to anybody else? What makes these questions so pertinent is Mr. Nixon's declaration last July 23 in his letter to Sen. Sam Erwin: "The tapes, which have been under my sole personal control, will remain so."

Not only was the grand jury unable to question the President but newsmen did not seize the opportunity. Following disclosure to Sirica of the 18½ minute erasure last Nov. 21, Mr. Nixon delayed conducting another press conference until Feb. 25. By then, the erased tape had been eclipsed by other Watergate sensations. Mr. Nixon was asked nothing then or in later question-and-answer sessions.

A new report by the experts will probably trigger questions at Mr. Nixon's next press conference. But whatever the press does, the House Judiciary Committee is deeply interested. Its

members feel the matter cannot be resolved without the President's own explanation of what happened to evidence "under my sole control."

That poses new trouble in Congress for the President. A bipartisan majority of the committee spurns Mr. Nixon's offers of responding to written questions or meeting with the committee's two senior members. But the White House says the President will never submit to interrogation by the full committee or its staff.

That Judiciary Committee members now contemplate how to question Mr. Nixon about the erasure indicates that the impeachment proceedings are entering a new phase, toward the substantive and away from the procedural. Thanks to compromises by Chairman Peter Rodino, the committee seems likely to avoid both an internal partisan split and a confrontation with the White House over procedural agreements.

Instead, committee members are now getting involved in the substance of the Watergate cover-up. Those who have been given an inkling of the evidence passed to the committee by the grand jury in that locked briefcase feel Mr. Nixon will face a formidable task in responding to it. The probability that he will also be asked to give a reasonable explanation of what happened to the June 20 tape only adds to his burden.