Sirica Gets Tape Gap Report

By George Lardner Jr. Washington Post Staff Writer

Technical experts gave U.S. District Court Judge John J Sirica their proposed final report yesterday on the 18½-minute gap in one of President Nixon's key Watergate tapes.

The report, according to informed sources, virtually rules out the possibility that the erasures were accidental.

Sirica ordered the lengthy study kept under seal and said he would make a decision on its "final disposition" in 10 days.

The experts originally concluded in January that the obliterated 18½-minute segment of the tape was the result of at least five separate erasures, all done manually, and could not have been caused by the foot pedal that Mr. Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, said she used.

Additional tests have reportedly strengthened those conclusions. Despite its scientific reserve, the new report, one source told The Washington Post, indicates more strongly than before that the erasures were deliberate.

White House lawyers, Watergate prosecutors, and the attorney for Miss Woods, Charles S. Rhyne, attended the closed session with Judge Sirica yesterday and were given copies of the experts' final draft for study. Sirica said they would be free to communicate with the experts about the findings.

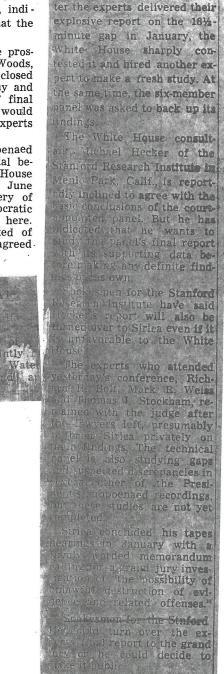
The erasures wiped out a subpoenaed discussion of the Watergate scandal between Mr. Nixon and then-White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman on June 20, 1972, three days after discovery of the break-in and bugging of Democratic National Committee headquarters here. Haldeman's notes show they talked of a "PR offensive to top this" and agreed.

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