

Sirica Gets Tape Gap Report

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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 "PP offensive to top this" and agreed

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pointed by Sirica last fall. After the experts delivered their explosive report on the 18½-minute gap in January, the White House sharply contested it and hired another expert to make a fresh study. At the same time, the six-member panel was asked to back up its findings.

The White House consultant, Michael Hecker of the Stanford Research Institute in Menlo Park, Calif., is reportedly inclined to agree with the basic conclusions of the court-appointed panel. But he has indicated that he wants to study the panel's final report with its supporting data before making any definite findings of his own.

Spokesmen for the Stanford Research Institute have said Hecker's report will also be turned over to Sirica even if it is unfavorable to the White House.

The experts who attended yesterday's conference, Richard H. Bolt, Mark R. Weiss and Thomas J. Stockham, remained with the judge after the lawyers left, presumably to brief Sirica privately on their findings. The technical panel is also studying gaps and suspected discrepancies in several other of the President's subpoenaed recordings, but these studies are not yet completed.

Sirica concluded his tapes hearings in January with a firmly worded memorandum calling for a grand jury investigation of "the possibility of unlawful destruction of evidence and related offenses."

Spokesmen for the Stanford Hecker could turn over the experts' final report to the grand jury or he could decide to make it public.