

Experts Firm on Cause of Tape Gap

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Technical experts yesterday flatly rejected White House contentions that the 18½-minute gap on one of President Nixon's Watergate tapes could have been caused by a faulty recording machine.

In a final report to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica, the experts stuck by their earlier findings that the gap was the result of at least five separate erasures, all done manually, and said they had "conclusively eliminated" the possibility that a malfunctioning recorder could be blamed.

The panel also said that its report "draws no inferences" about whether the erasure of the tape and the "buzz" that can now be heard on the tape were made "accidentally or intentionally," or "by what person or persons."

Shortly after the report was released, White House Special Counsel James D. St. Clair voiced his disagreement with it and charged that it "creates the false impression that all portions of the erasure were done manually and deliberately."

Another expert hired by the White House agreed with all of the court-appointed panel's conclusions — except for the finality with which it dismissed "possible internal malfunction" as the culprit.

The White House expert, Michael H. L. Hecker of the

Stanford Research Institute, acknowledged that all of the faulty-machine theories that had come to his or the panel's attention "have been disproved when scrutinized theoretically or experimentally."

However, Hecker maintained that "it is still possible that an acceptable hypothesis can be advanced by other scientists."

The six-member panel evidently thought otherwise.

Their 287-page report cited

new telltale signs on the subpoenaed tape — apparently first brought to their attention by Hecker himself — that they said could have been caused only by hand operation.

The experts said, as they

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first reported in January, that the Uher 5000 recording machine used by Mr. Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, "probably produced the entire buzz section" on the June 20, 1972, recording.

But they said that none of the erasures could have been caused by the floor pedal Miss Woods said she used.

Miss Woods' lawyer, Charles S. Rhyne, denounced the report in a 48-page motion asking Judge Sirica to reject it as having no evidentiary value. Rhyne charged that the study was "replete with error, hearsay, uncertainty, inconsistency, and incompetent opinion based on wrong assumptions."

The protest, however, appeared to be largely for the record.

Sirica had already turned over a draft of the report to Watergate Prosecutor Leon Jaworski for the Federal Grand Jury investigation into "the possibility of unlawful destruction of evidence" on the President's subpoenaed recordings.

More Watergate-related news on Pages 10, 11, 12 and 14.

The 18½ minutes of erasures on the June 20 tape wiped out a discussion of the Watergate bugging and break-in by Mr. Nixon and then-White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman.

Haldeman's notes of the meeting show that they talked about a "PR offensive to top this" and concluded that "We should be on the attack for diversion."

The President had asked Miss Woods last September to transcribe the gist of the recording, along with the tapes of other conversations that the Watergate grand jury had subpoenaed.

After White House lawyers reported the 18½-minute gap to Sirica last November, Miss Woods testified that she might have been responsible for part of it — when she stretched around at her desk at the White House last October 1 to answer a five-minute phone call. She said she accidentally pushed the "record" key on the ma-

chine instead of the "Stop" key and must have kept her foot on the floor pedal while she was chatting.

The court-appointed panel of experts, jointly sponsored at the outset by both the White House and Watergate prosecutors, reiterated their conclusions, this time with a mass of technical data, that none of the erasures could have been caused in the fashion that Miss Woods described.

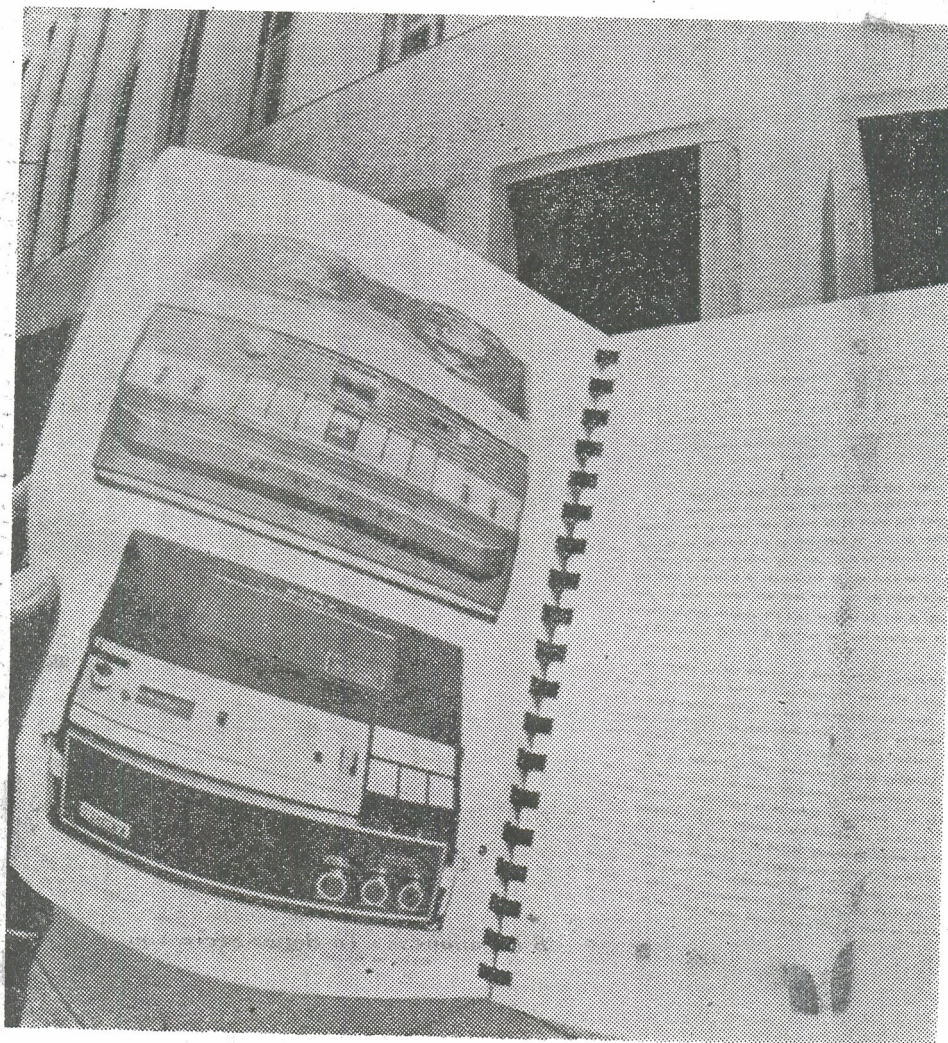
"The erasures and buzz recordings were done in at least five, and perhaps as many as nine, separate and contiguous segments," they said.

In addition, they emphasized, "erasure and recording in at least five separate places on the tape required hand operation of keyboard controls on the Uher 5000 machine."

In testifying before Sirica in January, the experts also disclosed that the Uher had a faulty component called a bridge rectifier which they replaced during their tests. The White House and Rhyne followed up with suggestions that the machine itself might have somehow caused the gap.

The expert panel maintained in yesterday's report that any such notion deserved a quick burial.

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Report on tape gap was shown with photos of recorder on left hand page