

Mystery Boxes in Watergate Case



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PRESIDENT FORD has been searching for seven elusive boxes of Watergate documents which he fears may contain damaging information about former Governor Nelson Rockefeller.

Until a few weeks ago, it appeared certain the boxes had been burned on orders of Nixon campaign aides. But during the past week, as President Ford mulled over his choice for the vice presidency, his "transition team" quietly sought the missing cartons.

Their purpose: to make absolutely sure that there is no Spiro Agnew scandal in Mr. Ford's future.

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ACCORDING to sworn testimony, the boxes, containing an estimated 7000 documents, were destroyed. But new reports suggest they may have been cached instead in a locked vault. The reports are now considered firm enough to have brought the special Watergate prosecutor into the probe.

The hearsay evidence, which is similar to that reaching Mr. Ford, is that Rockefeller helped bankroll a standby team of toughs for the 1972 Democratic convention. The ex-New York governor's office has denied the charge.

The boxes were hauled away by a Nixon loyalist named Roy Sheppard after the

Watergate break-in of June 1972.

In August, 1972, we came within an ace of getting them through Sheppard's lawyer, who was troubled about their hidden secrets.

But Sheppard adamantly refused to give them up. He later testified that he had burned them in his furnace on orders of Nixon campaign aides.

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A MONTH AGO we received reports that Sheppard had not burned the papers and once again we tried to find them. Mr. Ford's "transition team" also heard of the documents and assigned a crack lawyer to track them down.

The lawyer worked through last week-end chasing clues. He satisfied himself there was at least a slim chance the boxes exist.

Acting on White House orders, the lawyer immediately turned his clues over to assistant special prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste, who quickly reopened the investigation.

Footnote: Actually, the special prosecutor is not as interested in the Rockefeller material as he is in other rumored contents of the boxes. Reportedly, there is evidence of Mafia campaign influence and answers to other unresolved Watergate questions.