

Telephone Call Erased 18 Minutes of Watergate Tape

WASHINGTON (AP)—One of the famed White House tapes was played in public for the first time Tuesday but the only question it settled is that there is indeed a humdinger of a hum.

It lasted, as the White House said, 18 minutes and 15 seconds.

To straining ears in U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica's crowded courtroom, it sounded like electric clippers in a barber shop. Here and there, before and after the hum, the voices of President Nixon and aides John D. Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman could be heard in snatches of conversation.

"What the hell does that show you?" a voice like the President's said once. "I'd like a little of that consume today." The President again.

There was some whistling—tune and whistler unidentified.

Then the long buzz, loud at first, then a little lower and then loud again.

The tape, of a meeting in Nixon's Executive Office Building suite on June 20, 1972—involving first Ehrlichman and then Haldeman—was played as the President's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, was on the stand.

Miss Woods testified she was listening on the June 20 tape for signs of Ehrlichman leaving Nixon's office—and that the Haldeman conversation had already stated—when her telephone rang. As she reached for the phone—to the left and behind her—she said she accidentally pushed the record button. At the same time, she said, her foot must have been on the foot switch that starts the tape machine.

After the telephone conversation, she said, she noticed the record button down, listened to the tape and discovered the hum. Then, she said, she told the President who said not to worry because only the Ehrlichman conversation tape was under subpoena. This was an erroneous impression according to prosecutors.

On Nov. 14, as the National Security Agency was making copies of that tape for the judge, the 18-minute gap was discovered. Miss Woods said the President told her of the length of obliterated conversation.

"I couldn't believe there could be something like that unless there was a malfunction in the tape," the red-haired Miss Woods said. "I told him (Nixon) I didn't think that in any way my hitting the record button could cause that long a gap... I think I would have remembered that long a telephone conversation."

That left at least 13 minutes of obliterated conversation unexplained. Experts will assist Sirica in determining the cause.

It was the 10th day of a hearing that began as an inquiry into two subpoenaed Watergate tapes the White House said were nonexistent. It changed in character after the White House disclosure last week that the Haldeman conversation was missing the 18-minute segment.

Special Watergate prosecution force lawyers say that the part obliterated was conversation about the Watergate break-in that occurred only three days before the conversation was recorded.

The White House claims the entire erasure was caused by the pushed record button, "possibly

while the recorder was in the proximity of an electric typewriter and a high intensity lamp."

The typewriter and lamp will be brought to court and tested.

What was heard in court Tuesday was 38 minutes of a copy of the original tape. The original, including all the Ehrlichman conversation and what's left of Haldeman's, has been turned over to the judge and is under heavy guard at an unspecified place.

It's one of three tapes—of several turned over to Sirica—that the White House claims is covered by executive privilege and therefore should not go to the Watergate grand jury. The judge will make that decision once he has heard the tapes completely, listened to executive privilege arguments and had the recordings tested for authenticity by experts.

According to a White House brief, the June 20 conversation

covered national security wire-tapping, press conferences, legislative action on welfare reform proposals and the Stockholm conference on environment.

In subpoenaing the June 20 conversation, the special Watergate prosecutor said it "should show the extent of the knowledge of the illegal activity by the participants or any effort to conceal the truth from the respondent Nixon."

Stephen Bull, a presidential assistant who had charge of the tapes for a time, had written notations about each of the tapes subpoenaed. His notes were introduced into evidence Tuesday.

While the tapes hearing was in progress, the Senate Watergate committee acknowledged major investigations weren't going well and postponed further hearings until at least January. Committee senators attributed

the delay to witnesses who have ignored committee subpoenas, as their staff admitted that it wasn't ready to proceed and the White House refused to turn over some documents.

The possibility was left open by the senators that the panel would go out of existence next year without further public hearings.

Meanwhile, the White House pictured Nixon as being undecided about making some of his

income tax returns public. J. Bennett Johnston Jr., D-La., said Nixon promised him and other senators Monday night that he would open some of his returns to public review.

A White House spokesman Tuesday the President will make available complete information about his personal finances would not say if release of forms would be part of disclosure.

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warned.

"The Arabs respect the U. S. for the principals on which it stands. Many Arabs who studied in the P. S. have dreams of establishing a United States of Arabia. Now, it seems those basic ideals can only exist for the U. S. and that the U. S. will not support anyone else who wants the same civil rights and humanitarian treatment," Abdullah said.

"We don't want to drive the Israelis into the sea, all we want it to be able to return to lands which we have lived on for 2000 years and prosper side by side with the Jews," said Abdullah.

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