

"Rose Mary's Boo-Boo"

She is the oldest of the old Nixon hands--the President's unflinchingly loyal private secretary for almost all his in-and-out political life--and last week she took on the hardest assignment of her quarter-century in his service. For three days, Rose Mary Woods, 55, sat tense and bristly before an openly skeptical Judge John J. Sirica and testified that she may have erased at least some of the eighteen minutes missing from one of Mr. Nixon's secret Watergate tapes--all, of course, by "a terrible mistake."

But her story rested on one feat of contortion and several unlucky coincidences, and in the end the perfect secretary may have done the boss more harm than good. With two tapes already reported to be nonexistent, the gutting of a third--and Miss Woods's apologia for it--rendered the President's Operation Candor very nearly inoperative. "Anyone who believes him now," said one Texas congressman, "is a goddam fool." And his credibility stood in further peril still from the unlikeliest source of all: the possibility that Miss Woods might return to the stand to say that she was coached in the White House to forget about the gap the first time she was questioned about it--and finally to take the blame for it all by herself.

The official story of the gap did strain belief, in court and far beyond; even Mr. Nixon's head Watergate lawyer, J. Fred Buzhardt, admitted having suspected down to the day he first broke the news in court a fortnight ago that the erasure--whoever did it--had been intentional. Miss Woods insisted that it was not. She had, she said, been interrupted by a phone call in the midst of playing back a June 20, 1972, conversation between Mr. Nixon and his then chief of staff, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman; she guess^{ed} that by

accident--or really a series of them--she had punched the RECORDING button on her Uher Universal 5000, kept her toe on the operating treadle and so set the erase mechanism in motion while she was on the telephone.

But that, ^{alone} required a reach, physically and imaginatively as well (page 28). And her story came in train with a whole series of damaging disclosures--that the gap conveniently started just when Haldeman and the President began talking about Watergate; that Miss Woods was allowed to handle other original tapes long after her first "mistake" was discovered, and that there are still more unexplained silences on still more of the surviving Watergate recordings, some running up to several minutes. The doubt that so many vicissitudes could have befallen only nine tapes thus far under subpoena was palpable in the courtroom, and Judge Sirica for one was visibly less than pleased. He was said to be pondering a whole series of options, ranging from doing nothing at all to holding one or more of the principals in contempt--or referring their stories to the grand jury for possible perjury or obstruction-of-justice charges.

And therein lay the most explosive danger of all for the President: the possibility that his own Miss Woods might under pressure wind up a witness for the prosecution. Mr. Nixon's men by last week had already begun putting as much distance as possible between his cause and hers; Buzhardt's case tended to blame her for the entire eighteen-minute hiatus in the tape--not just the five minutes or so she said she had spent on the phone--and chief of staff Alexander Haig Jr. advised her curtly on Thanksgiving Day to get a lawyer of her own.