

# President's Secretary Says Some Tapes Unintelligible

By George Lardner Jr.  
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, testified yesterday that some of his secret Watergate tapes were of such "bad quality" that she doubted exact transcripts could ever be made.

She said "maybe a technician" could do the job but "I could not get every word and I don't believe anyone else could."

Miss Woods said that she was able to come up with "the gist" of the disputed talks, but it was not clear how complete the accounts were that she committed to paper. The President, she said, told her in late September to "get the highlights" since she would not be able to catch every line.

Called as a witness in federal court here, Miss Woods said she spent more than three weeks trying to transcribe the President's taped conversations about the Watergate scandal that have been singled out by grand jury and Senate subpoenas.

She described it as a frustrating job that had her muttering into the early morning hours at Camp David over the first tape she tackled.

"The quality is very bad on some," she told U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica. "If the President were to put up his feet on the desk, it sounds like a bomb. Boom! If dishes were picked up or taken away, you could hear the dishes. . . . On one tape, there was a band playing outside. . . . Sometimes you could hear

the President whistling. Other times, four people were talking at one time and you couldn't get even one voice."

It was Miss Woods' first court appearance during her 23 years with Mr. Nixon "in and out of office," but she testified in a firm voice. She responded reluctantly to some questions, sarcastically

to others, but without a trace of nervousness.

Appearing on the witness stand in a bright orange dress with a long pearl necklace, Miss Woods said she completed her work on the subpoenaed tapes in her possession on Oct. 23 or 24.

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on 26 tapes. Page A8.

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White House lawyers told Sirica on Oct. 23 that the President would "comply in all respects" with court orders demanding the tapes of nine conversations, former Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox had subpoenaed for the Watergate grand jury here.

Mr. Nixon and his top aides knew then that two of those tapes were missing, but the President's lawyers gave no hint of that until last week when they reported to Sirica their conclusion that the two conversations were never recorded. The hearings on the tapes began immediately.

Miss Woods said she turned over her rough transcripts of the other tapes to Mr. Nixon himself without making any copies.

The President's newly appointed courtroom lawyer Samuel J. Powers, asked her whether she tried to "edit" the conversations or "change or add" any words.

"Oh no, sir," Miss Woods replied. "Not at all."

However, she said was unable to come up with "verbatim transcripts."

In addition to working on the subpoenaed tapes, Miss Woods was assigned this past Monday to try to transcribe two other recordings — of the President's two meetings with White House counsel John W. Dean III last April 16. At the first encounter, in the Oval Office that morning, Dean has said, Mr. Nixon asked him to sign a letter of resignation. Dean said he refused and told the President at a second session in the Executive Office Building that afternoon that he would not be a "scapegoat" for the Watergate scandal.

At first, Miss Woods said she was unable to find the second conversation on the tapes given her Monday but she announced in court yes-

terday morning that the right tape recording of the meeting had just been found with the help of White House special counsel J. Fred Buzhardt Jr.

Assistant Watergate Special Prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste said the discovery posed a "substantial inconsistency" with earlier White House and Secret Service testimony about the recording machines switching over automatically from one to the other around midnight six times a week.

Miss Woods said the Executive Office Building tape initially given her for April 16 began with a "Good afternoon, Mr. President" from then-Secretary of State William Rogers. The President's logs showed that meeting began at 4:55 p.m. The logs also showed that the meeting with Dean lasted from 4:07 to 4:35 p.m. Miss Woods said this conversation was located yesterday morning on a different tape.

Ben-Veniste said this indicated that the two recording machines wired to the President's EOB office must have switched from one to the other in the late afternoon.

The April 14-16 weekend is crucial since it involves a subpoenaed conversation between the President and Dean on Sunday, April 15. According to Dean, Mr. Nixon made remarks at that meeting that implicated him in the Watergate cover-up.

The White House has said that the conversation was never recorded because the tape on the recording machine set for the EOB office that weekend was already filled up and that an automatic timer did not kick the second machine into action until around midnight of April 15.

Under questioning by assistant Watergate special prosecutor Jill Vollner, Miss Woods bristled at queries about how careful she had been with the tapes and said she took all the precautions that were needed to prevent any inadvertent erasures. She said White House aide Stephen Bull, who first gave her the tapes at Camp David Sept. 29, told her to be "very careful" and she said she was.

"I don't really think I'm so stupid that they had to go

over and over it," Miss Woods said. "I think I used every possible precaution."

"What precautions?" Mrs. Vollner asked.

Miss Woods replied testily: "I used my head. The only one I had to use."

Former White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Halde- man, who testified in the afternoon, indicated that he had less trouble than Miss Woods with one of the Watergate tapes that he monitored shortly before his resignation last April 30.

He called the quality of the recording—a series of March 21 meetings between Mr. Nixon and top aides, including Haldeman and Dean—"fair . . . not great" but "quite adequate for a report of a conversation."

Grimacing broadly, Halde- man told prosecutor Ben-Veniste, however, to watch out for his eardrums if he

gets to listen to the tapes himself. The microphones in the Oval Office, Halde- man said, are on the President's desk whenever coffee is served in the White House's china cups, "it's an ear-splitting problem for those listening to the recordings, I warn you."

The once crewcut presidential assistant, his hair now growing rapidly toward the collar of his glen-plaid suit, said he could not recall just why he had been given 22 tapes last April when he could remember listening to only one of them.

He said Mr. Nixon "wanted a review of the March 21 meeting" but he was hazy about what other tapes, if any, the President asked him to check.

White House and Secret Service logs show that Halde- man was given 22 tapes on April 25 which White House aide Bull extracted from the vault 10 minutes before the windup of a meeting between Mr. Nixon, Haldeman and former White House domestic adviser John D. Ehrlichman.

Haldeman and Ehrlichman also met with their lawyers, John Wils and Frank Strickler, in Haldeman's White House office before the tapes were borrowed and again the next day, April 26, when they were returned to Haldeman again.

The former White House chief of staff told the court that his attorneys did not listen to any of the tapes.



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

Newsman surround Rose Mary Woods, the President's secretary, as she leaves U.S. District Court. With her, at right is Douglas Parker, a White House attorney.



H. R. (BOB) HALDEAN



RICHARD BEN-VENISTE



SAMUEL J. POWERS

... questions and answers on the quality of the President's tapes