

YOUTH SQUAD AT WORK

Perry Mason would have smiled. Could Presidential secretary Rose Mary Woods show the court, the young prosecutor asked, just how she had accidentally erased a segment of the Watergate tapes? Miss Woods donned a pale-blue set of earphones, switched on the tape recorder in front of her and stepped down on the floor pedal with her left foot. Then assistant special prosecutor Jill Wine Volner told her to reach in the direction of the phone. "Before I did anything else, I had to take these off," Miss Woods told her, removing the earphones. Suddenly, the recorder stopped; Mrs. Volner looked down. "Right, and you just picked your foot off the pedal," she said quietly.

In recent weeks, life has been full of such small triumphs for Jill Volner and her partner, Richard Ben-Veniste. Since the firing of their former boss, Archibald Cox, the two 30-year-olds have gained the spotlight by pitting their considerable talents against the generation-older White House lawyers—and the results of questioning witnesses for the grand jury and Judge John J. Sirica have been sensational. Last week, for example, while Mrs. Volner zeroed in on Rose Mary Woods, Ben-Veniste got Presidential counsel J. Fred Buzhardt to admit that he believed until Thanksgiving eve that there was "no innocent explanation" for the eighteen-minute gap.

Honors: For his persistence, Ben-Veniste has been termed cocky and brash and disparaged by the White House as a "clever prosecutor." But his record is as formidable as his reputation. After receiving law degrees and academic honors from Columbia and Northwestern, Ben-Veniste in 1968 went to work in the office of the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, where he prosecuted major cases in organized crime

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Volner: The hemline is irrelevant

and labor racketeering. He was the third-ranking lawyer in the prosecution of Martin Sweig, onetime aide to former House Speaker John McCormack, when his two superiors abruptly quit—and Ben-Veniste took over to win the case. Last July, he enlisted in Cox's army, assuming charge of the six-lawyer Watergate task force in October.

The task force's "No. 2 man," Ben-Veniste says, is Mrs. Volner, a former Department of Justice lawyer whose participation in some ten trials exceeds the limited courtroom experience of any of her Watergate colleagues. A Chicagoan who had originally planned to apply her law degree to a journalism career, Mrs. Volner nearly flunked out of Columbia in her freshman year. She returned a year later, graduated on the dean's list in 1968 and took a job in Justice's organized-crime and racketeering section. Less controversial than Ben-Veniste, Mrs. Volner has her own set of problems. During

the 1972 trial of two union officials for extortion, a male court reporter reprimanded her for wearing a miniskirt—"My hemline is irrelevant to the proceedings," she maintains—and only last week, a factual dispute with Miss Woods brought a somewhat sexist put-down by Judge Sirica. "We have enough problems without you two ladies getting into an argument," he chided gently.

Hot Seat: Undeterred, Mrs. Volner kept up the questions about the physical details of Miss Woods's "terrible mistake": Why had she kept the recorder covered, thus hiding the tapes? How had she managed to push an extension button while cradling the phone? Wasn't the position uncomfortable? Mrs. Volner disconcerted Miss Woods by pacing up and down with the secretary's copy of the troublesome tape; if she was momentarily sidetracked, Ben-Veniste cued her in a whisper. And when the testy Miss Woods left the hot seat, Ben-Veniste moved on Buzhardt with a scathing sarcasm and near-total recall of the countless Watergate facts.

Ben-Veniste and Mrs. Volner say that they're not intimidated by their White House opposition—"We're lawyers. So are they," says Ben-Veniste; "I think they respect us"—nor by the magnitude of the Watergate case. To duck the flood of Watergate questions, they often get together for home dinner parties with the other lawyers in the group. And they try to avoid paranoia; Mrs. Volner shrugged off suggestions that the burglary of her Washington apartment last week—the second since she joined the task force—might have been Administration-inspired. For all their seeming casualness, however, the two are putting long hours and obvious dedication into their work. "You have to live the case," says Ben-Veniste. "There is very little room in the Watergate area for anything less than a total professional effort and commitment."