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Rose Mary Woods' Story of the Tapes

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PRESIDENT NIXON is past worrying about credibility on Watergate. Now he seeks mainly to guard against criminal prosecution.

That is the conclusion which emerges from the testimony of his secretary, Rose Mary Woods, in the case of the erased White House tape. For her statement, which falls apart as an account of what actually happened, hangs together as a defense against charges of obstructing justice.

The basic facts are not in doubt. On the morning of June 20, 1972, the first working day after the Watergate burglary, the President met seriatim with his two top White House aides, John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman. Tapes were made of both meetings.

On July 23 of this year, the Watergate special prosecutor issued a subpoena asking for, among other things, tapes of the "meeting of June 20, 1972 . . ."

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ON SEPTEMBER 29 the tapes were given to Miss Woods for transcription. On October 1 she transcribed the tape of the June 20 meetings. On November 8 she testified about the tapes and their transcription before the judge in the Watergate case, John Sirica.

At that time she made no mention of any gap or erasure in the June 20 tape. On November 21, the day before Thanksgiving, the President's lawyers told Judge Sirica that an 18-minute section of Mr. Nixon's talk with Haldeman was missing from the tape. On November 26 Miss Woods testified that she had inadvertently erased some of the Haldeman section from the tape.

As recounted by Miss Woods, the error required an extraordinary number of coin-

cidences. First there was a telephone call which came in just as Miss Woods began the Haldeman material. Miss Woods stopped the transcription to take the call. By coincidence she did not stop it the simple way, which was to take her foot off the power treadle.

Instead, she pressed the button for stopping the playback. By accident she pressed the wrong button — the button for recording. By accident she kept her foot on the pedal which activated the machine. Thus by accident the original recording was erased. By further accident the erasure covered material which, judging by written notes from Haldeman, related to Watergate.

All of that is very hard to believe. All the questions raised about the episode run into the ground.

Who called Miss Woods, for example? she doesn't remember. How come Miss Woods did not report the erasure when she testified on November 8? Because she was told that the tape of the Haldeman conversation was not under subpoena. By whom? By the President himself, for one thing.

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IN SHORT, a manifestly fishy story featuring blunders galore is set against an impenetrable alibi which fits perfectly together in every detail and involves only three persons — the President himself and his two most loyal servitors. The only reasonable conclusion is that disclosure of the taped material would have incriminated the President and Haldeman. That the President has the brass to hide behind such an absurd story only reinforces the impression that there is no way to bring him to account short of impeachment.