

White House Didn't Quiz Miss Woods

Told Nothing, Her Lawyer Says

By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein

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Rose Mary Woods, President Nixon's personal secretary and a central figure in the inquiries about the 18½-minute erasure in one of the White House tape recordings, has not been asked a "single question" about the matter by the President or White House attorneys, according to Miss Woods attorney.

Charles S. Rhyne, her attorney, said yesterday that "I would have thought that someone would have questioned her" in the White House after the erasure was discovered. "It's hard to believe that they didn't . . . They did not question her in the slightest."

Both Rhyne and the White House denied report published in The Washington Post yesterday that Miss Woods had been asked to take responsibility for the 18½-minute erasure on the June 20, 1972, tape involved in the Watergate investigation. Miss Woods has testified under oath that she could have accidentally erased 5 minutes of the tape but no more.

"Rose was not asked anything or told anything," in the White House after the erasure was discovered, Rhyne added after discussing the matter further with

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her yesterday. "She was called in by (White House chief of staff Alexander M.) Haig and told to 'get yourself a lawyer'."

A short time before that, on Nov. 14, when the White House said it first discovered the 18½-minute erasure, Rhyne said Miss Woods was told by Mr. Nixon personally, "Look, Rose, that wasn't a 4- or 5-minute gap but 18 minutes."

Rhyne said yesterday that "was the sum and substance of the conversation . . . it was left hanging."

Two reliable sources previously have told The Washington Post, and reiterated yesterday, that the President had asked Miss Woods if she could not be responsible for the entire 18½-minute gap. Rhyne denied this yesterday after conferring with Miss Woods.

Last night, when told that Rhyne had said that the President had asked Miss Woods no questions about the erasure, deputy White House press secretary Gerald L. Warren said he was "sure that they (the President and Miss Woods) discussed it." He added, however, that the White House was not quarreling with any portion of Miss Woods' testimony about the matter in court.

Warren also called the reports that Miss Woods was asked to take the blame for the entire 18½-minute gap "false and incredible."

Miss Woods, November, 1973, testimony in the court hearing on the tape erasure,

conducted by U.S. District Chief Judge John J. Sirica, has left somewhat unclear the question of whether she discussed the matter with the President.

At one portion in the testimony she specifically said "I have not" to the question of whether she discussed the question of the gap with Mr. Nixon. At another portion of the testimony however, she said, "I told him I didn't think there was any way my hitting the record button (on the tape recorder) caused the long gap." This implies that she was asked a question about it.

Rhyne said yesterday that White House counsel J. Fred Buzhardt went ahead in November after learning of the gap and, without consulting Miss Woods, conducted tests with the tape recorder to determine what happened. At no point did the White House lawyers "imply to her that she had done more" than erase 4 or 5 minutes, Rhyne said.

Rhyne said that White House lawyer Leonard Garment "is very, very upset about what happened to her . . . he would tell you that he and Buzhardt didn't question her from Nov. 14 to the day after Thanksgiving when I came into the case. . . I think that Len (Garment) was worn down by this." Garment, who no longer is involved directly in the President's Watergate defense, could not be reached for comment.

Rhyne said that there are matters yet to emerge in the continuing hearing on the 18½ minute gap that will help explain what happened.

Without elaborating Rhyne, a former Duke Law School classmate of the President, said: "I had to defend her when I learned what happened . . . this is a unique experience for writers as well as lawyers. It took an awful lot to get Charlie Rhyne into it . . . these are the kind of things that try men's souls."

The erased 18½-minutes on the June 20, 1972, tape had been a conversation about Watergate between President Nixon and his then chief of staff H.R. Haldeman, according to Haldeman's own notes of the meeting.

It was one of the tapes subpoenaed by the special Watergate prosecutor and was considered important in answering the question of whether the President had

knowledge of the Watergate cover-up on that date, three days after the Watergate arrests.