

Rose Mary Woods: Facing Her Two Crises

By Judy Bachrach

Back in the early '50s, just after Richard M. Nixon had been elected to the Senate, Rose Mary Woods came to him for a job as his personal secretary.

They had known each other from Nixon's days on the House committee set up to study overseas relief, which is where Rose Mary Woods had worked as a secretary after leaving Sebring, Ohio. Nixon was impressed with the pale 32-year-old woman, that much was evident. His own mother, Hannah Nixon, was later to inform her son that Rose Mary Woods was "our kind of people," and perhaps the young secretary sensed this at the time.

"She knew she would be hired," says one close friend who tells the story. "But Rose just felt she had to tell him two things before he hired her."

"There are two things I must tell you," Rose Woods told her future boss. "The first is that

I'm a Democrat. And the second is that I'm a Catholic."

"You see," the friend explains, "Rose remembered a time, back when she was growing up in Sebring—well, she remembered a cross burning on her family's lawn one time, see, and she figured that might work against her being hired."

The people of Sebring (pop. 5,000) say they are very proud of Rose Woods and they simply do not remember a cross burning on her lawn, but it might have happened, they add. Most of the people in Sebring are Protestant ("I didn't really know Rose," says one. "We went to different churches."), most are Democrats, like Thomas Woods Sr., Rose Mary's father, a big hulking redhead with a temper.

"A true Irishman," concedes James Birch

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with a chuckle. Birch is Rose Mary Wood's first cousin. "But her mother, Mary, was very quiet. A sort of settling influence."

Tom Woods, a prominent citizen (everyone in Sebring refers to him as a "prominent citizen") who had a park named after him, lived in a pleasant, shingled house across the street from St. Ann's Church and worked as a manager for the Royal China Co. It was the firm that was to provide the redheaded child who resembled him most with her first clerical job after high school.

"No, I did not hire Rose because she was Tom Woods' daughter," says Beatrice Lucille Miller who ran the company and was an old family friend. "I hired her because she was a very quiet girl and never a pusher. A model young woman, really. I never knew Rose to do anything dishonest."

Mrs. Miller pauses because she knows there are people around who, unlike her, do not comprehend the full depths of her old employee's integrity. She knows there are people who wonder about the 18½ minutes of erased tape.

"But nobody believes it. Including me. Rose would never do anything she wasn't told to do. I don't know," sighs the woman who employed Rose Mary Woods for more than seven years. "If I ever heard that she really did [erase the tape] I wouldn't ever believe in anyone ever again."

Mrs. Miller, who has had many conversations with Rose Woods over the years, says she knows a thing or two about the relationship between Richard Nixon and his faithful employee.

"Rose would die for him," she says flatly. "Rose would just lay down her life and die for him."

Just a few weeks ago the latest report of the tape experts came out. It was 287 pages long, but the gist of what it said was this: that a June 20, 1972, tape-recorded conversation between Mr. Nixon and H. R. Haldeman had definitely been manually erased at least five times, causing an 18½ minute deletion.

That was one of the tapes Rose Mary Woods had transcribed, and her lawyer, Charles Rhyne, called the findings "replete with error," but then he is less than pleased with the way much of the tape problem has been handled.

Back at Thanksgiving, the day the missing tape portion first hit the headlines, Rhyne received a phone call from Alexander Haig who told him that Rose Mary Woods needed a lawyer.

"Haig told me a day later," says Rhyne, "that White House lawyers had arrived at the conclusion that Rose had erased the tape and they were not going to defend her."

Rhyne looks grim. "They (lawyers Leonard Garment and J. Fred Buzhardt) told this, that it was no accident, to both (Judge John) Sirica and (Special Prosecutor Leon) Jaworski. Of course to be fair, they were basing this on (the theory) that the high-intensity lamp and her electric typewriter put the buzz on it. Anyway, I called Rose.



By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

Rose Mary Woods arrives at a party with her frequent escort, Robert Gray.

"Yes, she was in tears—" Rhyne stares at the interviewer—"Wouldn't you be?"

[On Nov. 21, J. Fred Buzhardt entered Judge John Sirica's chambers and in a classic bit of understatement told him, "Judge, we have a problem." He then went on to say that there was an 18-minute gap and that "It doesn't appear from what we know at this point that it could have been accidental." Rose Woods, said Buzhardt, had said she had made "a slight erasure."]

In fact, Rose Mary Woods told Judge Sirica and the world that she might have erased about five minutes of that tape by doing a number of simultaneous and intricate contortions while talking on the telephone.

A lot of people did not believe this scenario. They called it The Rose Mary Stretch. John Bennett, a former White House aide who was in charge of the tapes, didn't know what to believe at the time.

"I was puzzled," Bennett admits. "At first I figured it was **some** unintentional action. Now I figure there must have been some intentional action. Rose is as good a candidate as any. But then I am a better one, and I know I didn't do it."

The other Rose Mary Woods crisis occurred about two months ago when Herbert W. Kalmbach, Nixon's former lawyer, testified that Charles (Bebe) Rebozo had told him that portions of a secret \$100,000 campaign contribution from Howard Hughes were either loaned or given to the President's secretary.

Reporters who had known that Rose Mary Woods lived in a comfortable two-bedroom apartment she had purchased at the Watergate in October, 1969, suddenly began to wonder how she got the money to afford it. Even some of the administration people wondered...

"It could be," sighs one White House source. "Listen. I don't think anyone is incapable of taking [the money]. I mean any guy who was around the administration for the '72 election—if he's totally **honest with himself**—would say, 'There but for the grace of God go I!...'"

In September, 1952, while he was campaigning as vice presidential run-

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ning-mate to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard Nixon underwent one of his crises. It was called "The Secret Fund Scandal" and it broke while he and Pat and his adviser, Murray Chotiner, and Rose Woods—the old, hardy regulars—were riding the campaign train out West.

It was a crucial time for Nixon. He was accused of having his lifestyle supported by a "secret club of millionaires," and Ike was not exactly supporting his running-mate.

So it seemed like the end of the ride when Nixon dictated to Rose Mary Woods his letter of resignation to Eisenhower and told her to send it out immediately. Upon hearing the news, Chotiner came racing out of his compartment, whirled the secretary around and ripped the letter out of her hands, tearing it to shreds.

"You didn't have to do that," she said simply. "I wouldn't have sent it out anyway."

"What you've got to understand," says Henry D. Spalding who tells the story, "what you should know is that if Rose and Chotiner hadn't done that, the whole history of our nation would have been altered."

Spalding, who wrote "The Nixon Nobody Knows," and was reporting on the Nixon campaign in those days, says that on the train "Rose didn't have hours. Boy, she was around the clock. To bed at 3 a.m. and up at 6. She was more than his secretary. She was his right-hand man. And when she wanted, she could be as closed-mouthed as Coolidge."

Asked who Rose Woods was dating back when she was 32 and had a complexion that reporters insisted on describing as "china-white," Spalding chuckles.

"I dunno," he says. "I tried and didn't get anywhere. Well, I asked Rose out for a couple of drinks. And you know what she said? She said, 'We have all the drinks we need right here on the train, courtesy of the Republican Party.'"

Well, everyone wants to know about Rose Mary Woods' love life. It is a subject veiled in as much mystery as surrounds the tape deletion, and it is of abiding interest to her friends.

"Rose left Sebring because her boyfriend died," confides Mrs. Miller, her old employer. "Oh she was heartbroken. I don't think she'll ever marry. Do you?"

"He was a high school basketball star," says Joe Woods, her older brother, who says that's not why Rose left Sebring. "And they were supposed to get married after graduation. But then he died of spinal meningitis the February after graduation."

Rose Mary Woods' friends seem to be divided into two categories: those who insist she never had a steady boyfriend (and attribute this to the departed beau of her youth) and those who claim she's had, as one of her dear pals says, "plenty of chances," but



A photo released by the White House last November demonstrating the "Rose Mary Stretch." She told Judge Sirica she may have erased part of a tape while reaching for the telephone.

never married because there is some mysterious man out in the Midwest waiting patiently for her. No one thinks she'll marry Robert Gray, the perfectly groomed, perfectly mannered executive vice president of Hill and Knowlton (he was Secretary to the Cabinet during the Eisenhower administration) who is her steady escort these days.

"Bob Gray" echoes Wiley Buchanan, a former chief of protocol and a buddy of Rose Woods. "Oh no. He's just an escort. Nice manners. He won't fall down drunk on a date and have to be carried home or anything."

"Once," says another friend. "Once I met this great diplomat and I called Rose and said, 'Rose. Got this great guy for you.' But she said no, there was this businessman out in Chicago and they'll marry within a month after she leaves the White House. And I can only hope and pray that the minute Nixon leaves, that's exactly what she'll do."

But Richard Nixon is still in office.

Steve Martindale, another perfectly groomed man who works for Bob Gray at the public-relations firm of Hill and Knowlton, and has double-dated with the older couple, compares his boss's companion to a nun.

"Well if you stay with someone like (Richard Nixon) that long, it's sort of like being a nun. You give up everything for the Church and you are loyal to the Church no matter what. Yours isn't really to question why. He needs you, you're committed and there you are."

And there she is. Rose Mary Woods has been there more than 23 years. She and Pat Nixon swap clothes; they chat while the President works deep into the night. She occasionally selects Richard Nixon's shirts. Julie and Tricia call her "Aunt Rose." Rose Woods was there when her boss suffered defeat in his first presidential campaign. And again, two years later, when he was **walloped by Edmund (Pat) Brown** in the California gubernatorial race. Nixon wasn't the only one who felt kicked around.

"I think it's no secret that Rose was very, very bitter," says Ann Whitman, Eisenhower's former secretary and a close friend. "I remember she had a terrific fight with (newsmen) Bill Lawrence. She felt he'd been unfair to Nixon."

Rose Woods has been there consistently. Steadfastly. And she hates with a very real passion the people who dislike her boss. When Nixon came to New York to work as a lawyer, she and Pat Nixon would take turns answering the phone, the **secretary passing** excess calls to the wife who would identify herself inevitably as "Miss Ryan."

It is impossible to question Rose Mary Woods' loyalty. The real question, the monumental question is, **rather, why the loyalty? What makes a woman devote 23 years of her life to the exclusive service of one man?**

"You've hit it there," says someone still at the White House. "But Rose—she worked her way up from the grass roots. And you must consider this:

maybe this is the only life she *could* have had."

Rose Mary Woods' loyalty has conferred upon her the kind of license permitted few others in the President's rarefied circle. Former presidential assistant Robert Finch remembers her "giving a good Irish piece of her mind" to senators, governors. Others have seen her snap back at Nixon.

"I remember," says one former loyalist, "during the '68 campaign when Nixon would blow up at her, she'd do the same to him with a freeze glare and a few tart comments. She had a willingness to sass him back that was too absent among others."

"Rose knew, you see," the source continues. "She knew who everyone was, what their relationship to the President was, all the secrets of the past. Who contributes ideas. Who contributes money. Who makes a big noise and couldn't be counted on. And to have somebody like that when you're not very good at it yourself is invaluable. And Nixon wasn't very good at that."

Because that is Rose Mary Woods' main function: knowing. She knew old friends and grew distressed when she couldn't usher them past the Halde-man blockade. ("She has more savvy," says someone still at the White House, "than all those p-r types put together.") She knew speeches and would regularly dissect each one. She knew who to invite to White House functions and those who were left out in the cold put her high on their enemy lists.

Inviting and not inviting eventually

became one of the few means of exercising power left to Rose Mary Woods. H. R. Haldeman managed to strip her of most of the others.

In 1968, the woman who had been habituated by years of service to exercising considerable influence over Richard Nixon was suddenly blocked by the White House chief of staff.

"What did Haldeman take away?" echoes a former Nixon associate. "Well, proximity is the main thing. Haldeman moved into that tiny office outside the Oval Room. And with that came ready access to the President."

It is said that at one point Haldeman tried to move Mr. Nixon's faithful secretary to the Executive Office Building.

"Quite right," says Wiley Buchanan. "Haldeman was very jealous. Whenever the President was around, Haldeman took every opportunity to keep Rose occupied and out of the way."

Buchanan says that Rose Woods put up with this for a while. But finally she went to Mr. Nixon and told him she was going to quit.

"Rose said she would go quietly and not make a fuss. Well Nixon told her not to go. And then he called Haldeman in and really laid him low."

If he did, it didn't work. As one White House source puts it: "Yes there was a struggle going on. And Rose lost."

But in April, 1973, almost a year after the Watergate break-in, Richard M. Nixon sorrowfully announced the departure of John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, his two most trusted aides.

Two months later Richard Nixon promoted Rose Mary Woods from personal secretary to executive assistant. "Well that's what she was all along, really," declares one indignant friend.

Maybe that's true. But that's not the point. The point is that in the end Rose Mary Woods won.

After a fashion.

About five months after her promotion all hell broke loose for Rose Mary Woods, and the subsequent testimony about the \$100,000 contribution only increased her worries. Steve Bull, a Nixon aide who believes in her integrity, says she "is comporting herself with an unusual amount of poise and confidence these days."

But another White House source disagrees. "She's showing the strain, I think, in her face. Well, she's become self-indulgent. Feels sorry for herself. Catch her in an off-moment," he advises. "She's been ridiculed nationally. She's devoted her whole life—her whole life to attaining this national position. And now that she's got it..." The voice trails off.

"Yes, she's been humiliated," agrees yet another White House faithful. "But maybe humiliation is good for her. Did you ever think of that?"

Did Rose Woods ever think of that? Of the beneficial aspects of humiliation?

"Well," says the first source, "if all

else fails, make a martyr out of yourself."

The source thinks that she is actually enjoying herself "in a morbid sort of way."

"I mean now she's getting all the notoriety, all the recognition that was once denied her as a result of the Haldeman-Ehrlichman blockade."

The notoriety follows Rose Woods. Everywhere. Bob Gray, a savvy public-relations man if there ever was one, makes her go to parties these days to show her face even when she feels tired, just so people can see Rose Woods. Up there. Dancing. Her bright red hair an indecorous note against diaphanous dark dresses and serpentine boas. And at whatever party she happens to be, reporters will be there also.

Rose Woods doesn't have much use for reporters. She equates them with bad news, bad luck—and not just Watergate-related bad luck, either.

Just a few months back, she and Bob Gray went to a return-to-the-tango party at the Argentinian embassy, and an Argentinian TV man was there asking guests when was the last time they had tangoed. Gray begged Rose Woods to grant him an interview.

"Well, I thought 'Here's the perfect chance for Rose to talk to a foreign reporter about nonpolitical things.' So I got her to go before the cameras. Well all of a sudden I see the smile die on Rose's face and I'm thinking to myself 'What's that SOB asking her?' And then I see the TV guy whirl around and fall."

The TV reporter had fainted.

So Rose Woods won't talk. "I'm sorry," Marjorie Acker, her assistant, told this reporter. "But Miss Woods feels that since she's refused so many interviews, it would be unfair to grant you one."

White House communications director Ken Clawson calls her "the symbol of continuity," and maybe she is. For one reason or another, they have abandoned Richard Nixon—most of the others. But Rose Woods who it is said wept with Pat Nixon in a lonely hotel room right after the secret fund scandal broke, and Rose Woods who was injured in Venezuela when they threw rocks at Vice President Nixon, and Rose Woods who arrives to work each morning at 8 and glances at her office wall where Nixon-family photos hang—Rose Woods still remains.

"I think the one thing you've got to give her," Clawson says, "is that she's survived."

So far, anyway. But how can Rose Woods survive if Richard Nixon does not?

"Boy that's a rough one," says a White House source with a sigh. "Rose has labored in the vineyards so long that I'm worried for her. Let's face it. Rose has hitched her whole life to one star. And right now that star is about 13 degrees below the horizon."



Drawing by Vint Lawrence