

Toughing It Out With Nixon

A Rose Among the

By Judy Bachrach
Washington Post

Washington

IN SEPTEMBER, 1952, while he was campaigning as vice presidential running-mate to General 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."

★ ★ ★

STEVE MARTINDALE, who works for Rose Mary's sometime escort Bob Gray at a public-relations firm, 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



Rose Mary Woods, flanked by attorney Charles S. Rhyne and Steven Bull, outside a Washington courthouse

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

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 Haldeman 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 whom to invite to White House functions, and those who were left out in the cold put her high on their enemy lists.

Survivors

"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, a former chief of protocol and a buddy of Rose Woods. "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, in connection with the 18½-minute gap, and

"Haldeman was very jealous. Whenever the President was around, Haldeman took every opportunity to keep Rose

subsequent testimony about a \$100,000 contribution from Howard Hughes 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."

Another 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."

★ ★ ★

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."