

THE CRISIS: The Secretary and the Tapes Tangle

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"Next to a man's wife, his secretary is the most important person in his career. She has to understand every detail of his job; to have unquestioning loyalty and absolute discretion. On every count Rose measures up. I'm a lucky man."

—Richard Nixon, in a press interview, 1957

"The buttons said on and off, forward and backward. I caught on to that fairly fast. I don't think I'm so stupid as to erase what's on a tape."

—Rose Mary Woods, in court testimony, Nov. 8, 1973

Precisely because her loyalty to her boss has never been questioned and she never makes stupid errors, Rose Mary Woods was deeply enmeshed last week in the Watergate toils that have touched the lives of so many who tied their careers to Richard Nixon's political fate. The President's personal and personable secretary sat uncomfortably in a Washington federal courtroom and told a confused and tangled story of how she had, after all, made "a terrible mistake." Contrary to her testimony of Nov. 8, she said that she apparently had pushed the wrong button on a recorder and erased a potentially crucial portion of one of Nixon's Watergate-related tape recordings.

By raising new doubts and suspicions, Miss Woods' testimony sharply nipped any budding success of the President's ongoing Operation Candor, which is aimed at explaining away his multiple Watergate woes. Her statements posed a new threat to Nixon's survival in office. For if Miss Woods' story is shown to be untrue, the inescapable conclusion would be that at least one of the subpoenaed Nixon tapes has been deliberately and criminally altered. Since the President has sworn that those recordings were in "my sole personal control," he presumably would be legally responsible for any such destruction of evidence.

Scientific Scrutiny.

As the President's attorneys finally delivered some of those subpoenaed tapes to Federal Judge John J. Sirica, a new phase began in the legal controversy over whether Nixon was innocent of any knowledge of the wiretapping of Democratic National Committee headquarters in June 1972, and of the many efforts of his closest aides to conceal the higher origins of that crime. Now the

critical question of whether a cover-up might even still be in progress can be subjected to scientific scrutiny. Technical experts disagree on their proficiency at detecting tape alterations. But they very likely can determine whether the mysterious tone that obliterated a crucial conversation on one of those tapes came about precisely as Miss Woods said it did.

In Judge Sirica's court last week, Miss Woods testified that she must have been responsible for at least 4½ minutes of a raspy, overriding hum on the tape of a talk between Nixon and H.R. Haldeman, then his Chief of Staff, on June 20, 1972, just three days after the Watergate burglary. Archibald Cox, the fired Watergate special prosecutor, had asked for the tape last July 23, contending that "the inference is almost irresistible" that Haldeman and former Domestic Affairs Adviser John Ehrlichman had reported to Nixon on that day whatever they knew about the Watergate wiretapping operation. Further, said Cox, Haldeman and Ehrlichman "may well have received instructions" from the President on how to handle the affair.

Through three months of an extraordinary struggle in the courts, Nixon resisted subpoenas for his tapes, yielding only when he seemed in imminent danger of being cited for contempt of court if he did not. Then the nine subpoenaed tapes dwindled like nine little Indians. The number slipped to seven when the White House contended that two were "nonexistent." Nixon claimed that one of them—a telephone call on June 20, 1972 to John Mitchell, then re-election committee chief—was not taped because he had placed it from his White House living quarters, on a phone that had no taping apparatus. Another conversation with former White House Counsel John Dean on April 15 was not secretly recorded because, Nixon says, the equipment ran out of tape.

Of the remaining seven tapes, the one at the center of attention last week was rendered apparently useless by the blanked-out conversation with Haldeman. Two other tapes, Nixon argues, should be withheld from the Watergate grand jury because of special executive-privilege considerations.

Sirica ordered that arguments on this claimed privilege be held this week, sending the remaining four tapes on to the Watergate grand jury.

Self-Assured. It was during Sirica's hearings on whether two of the tapes could not be produced at all that Rose Mary Woods, 55, publicly entered the controversy on Nov. 8 for the first time. In her first court appearance of a long career in high-pressure politics, she was self-assured. She was also testy and openly antagonistic toward her questioner: Jill Wine Volner, 30, a persistent courtroom lawyer and member of the Watergate special prosecutor's staff. Miss Woods, her green eyes flashing with Irish indignation, grimaced at what she considered repetitive questioning, shook her head, pointed a finger at Mrs. Volner and spoke sarcastically. Could Miss Woods have accidentally erased anything?

Miss Woods: I think I used every possible precaution.

Mrs. Volner: What precautions?

Miss Woods: I used my head—the only one I had to use.

The secretary was drawn reluctantly back into Sirica's courtroom last week after an embarrassed and nervous White House counsel, J. Fred Buzhardt, told the judge on Nov. 21 that 18 minutes of Nixon's June 20 conversation with Haldeman was totally obscured by a persistent hum. At the time Buzhardt said that neither he nor Government technicians could explain how the noise had originated. But last week he said that an explanation had been found, and that Miss Woods would provide it.

Meanwhile, the President's secretary had been curiously abandoned by White House lawyers, who had appeared with her before in court. She explained that Alexander Haig, Nixon's Chief of Staff, had advised her to hire her own attorney. Ostensibly, this might have been wise because she could be in danger of personal indictment for any conflict with her previous testimony. She hired Charles S. Rhyne, a former president of the American Bar Association. The break also seemed to signal some potential disagreement between the secretary and the White House lawyers. Last week Miss Woods reappeared in court, and Rhyne was conspicuously present. When Mrs. Volner linked Rhyne with the other White House attorneys, he jumped up and declared: "I don't want to be associated with White House counsel. I'm a private lawyer."

On the stand, Miss Woods was far more subdued and apologetic than before, but still combative at times. She was jolted by Mrs. Volner's opening reminder that she had a constitutional right to remain silent, and that anything she said could possibly be used against her in future proceedings. Yet she remained cool enough to display her wit. Asked why she hired Rhyne, she replied with a smile: "There aren't many attorneys left around town."

Miss Woods explained that on the weekend of Sept. 29 and 30 she had worked at Camp David to transcribe some of the subpoenaed tapes for Nixon's use and possible transmittal to the court. She played the recordings back on a Sony 800B portable tape recorder —the same model used to make the President's office recordings. Since her machine had no foot pedal, she had to press various buttons to reverse and replay portions of the tapes. She found the job hard, she said, because there were loud sounds on the tapes, and the speakers' voices often overlapped. She testified that Nixon dropped in to see how she was doing. "He pushed a button back and forth

and said, 'I don't see how you're getting any of this.' " She labored for some 29 hours on just one conversation—between Nixon and Ehrlichman on June 20.

She returned to her office in the White House the following Monday, Oct. 1, to complete work on the tape. Now she had a West German Uher 5000 recorder. It was equipped with a foot pedal, which can advance the tape—but only when constant pressure is applied. A foot-operated switch on the side of the pedal also permits a rapid rewinding of the tape for replaying a portion. She had completed transcribing the Ehrlichman conversation, she said, when the tape ran on into Haldeman's talk with the President—a portion, she testified, that Haig had told her was not under subpoena. The last she heard, she said, was a chat between Haldeman and Nixon about Ely, Nev., Pat Nixon's birthplace.

Then it happened. Her telephone, behind her and at arm's length to her left, rang. She took off her earphones with both her hands, reached for the stop button with her right hand but by mistake must have hit the record button, which is next to the stop button but of a lighter gray color. With her left hand she reached back for the phone, cradled it under her chin and talked to the caller—although she could not remember who it was. She estimated the length of the call variously from 4½ to 6 minutes. Throughout, she said at first, she kept her left foot on the pedal. She agreed with Mrs. Volner that she could have stopped the recorder by merely lifting her foot. "Then why did you push the button?" asked Mrs. Volner. "Because I've done it both ways," Miss Woods replied. In any event, when both the record button and the pedal are depressed, any sound on the tape is erased.

Explaining that she did not notice the reels turning because the top of the recorder was closed, Miss Woods said that she discovered her error only when she hung up the phone and then listened to the tape. She was horrified to hear the loud hum instead of conversation. She said she rushed right into the Oval Office and told Nixon. "I've made a terrible mistake. I accidentally pushed the record button and part of the tape is empty." He replied:

"Don't worry about it. It's not a subpoenaed tape."

Not Important?

As her reason for not having earlier told the court about the gap in the tape, Miss Woods also relied on that odd White House belief that the Haldeman part of the conversation was not wanted by the Special Prosecutor. Asked Judge Sirica solemnly: "Didn't you think it was important to tell everything you knew?" Replied Miss Woods: "I can only say that I am dreadfully sorry." Sirica

ordered that her earlier denials of any mistake be reread from the record. After hearing them she said: "I can only say again, I did work very hard over the whole weekend. Sure, I sounded a little cocky there ... I can offer no excuse."

The most dramatic moment in the court session came when Mrs. Volner asked Miss Woods to re-enact her motions as the "mistake" was made. The secretary quickly demonstrated how she had turned slightly away from her typewriter, made a long stretch, and reached for the phone. Looking down, Mrs. Volner said dryly: "You took your foot off the pedal, didn't you?" Indeed she had lifted her foot. Flustered, Miss Woods declared: "Yes, that's just because I'm here and not doing anything else."

Later, Miss Woods began to qualify her explanation. She was no longer entirely sure that she had kept her foot on the pedal ("People keep telling me I must have"). At worst, she would take responsibility for only the first five minutes or so of the overriding noise, the period while she was speaking on the phone. She did not know where the other 13 minutes of disturbance came from. She bristled when Mrs. Volner termed the interval "an erasure." "You may call it an erasure—I call it a gap," protested Miss Woods. Later she testified she was not at all certain there had been any conversation under the noise. "I never heard any words on that segment," she said.

The Uher company's representatives and other experts immediately challenged Miss Woods' testimony. The Uher 5000 recorder, claimed Frank Larkin, sales manager of the West Coast distributor of the equipment, is "designed to be fail-safe—you have to do two things simultaneously to erase. I just can't conceive that a woman who has the intelligence to be the secretary for the Chief Executive of the U.S. could make such a mistake." Pearl Neier, a Manhattan legal secretary, echoed the view of many other experienced secretaries: "I can't conceive of how she could have erased that tape without doing it deliberately—I don't care if it was a button or a pedal that she had to push." Asked if he believed the Woods account, a former high official of the Republican National Committee scoffed: "Does anybody?"

A part of the controversial tape was played in the courtroom. The quality was surprisingly poor, with much of the conversation between Nixon and Ehrlichman indistinguishable. Nixon was heard to remark: "In the '68 campaign the press was violently pro-Humphrey." After Haldeman entered, the hum began. It was a steady sound that did not waver in its medium-high pitch. But after 5½ minutes the hum suddenly became softer, and some sporadic clicks could be heard for 13 minutes.

The White House submitted some notes said to be taken by Haldeman on his June 20 conversation with Nixon. They revealed that the only discussion of Watergate occurred just after

the chitchat about Ely—and where the hum began. Said Haldeman's notes: "What is our counterattack? PR [public relations] offensive to top this. Hit the opposition w/ their activities ... Do they justify this less than stealing Pentagon Papers ...? We should be on the attack for diversion."

Like Miss Woods, White House Attorney Buzhardt was also pressed hard when he took the stand and was questioned by Watergate prosecutors. Often pleading a lack of memory, he finally conceded under questioning that he had first learned in early or mid-October that there was some difficulty with the Haldeman portion of the tape, although he claimed not to have been aware of the full 18-minute problem until mid-November. His reason, too, for not telling the court about this much sooner was that he thought the Haldeman conversation was not under subpoena. Sirica seemed openly skeptical. The subpoena had asked for the tape of a "meeting of June 20, 1972 in the President's Executive Office Building office involving Richard Nixon, John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman from 10:30 a.m. to noon (time approximate)." Cox amended the subpoena on Aug. 13 to make it unmistakably clear, extending the time covered from 10:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. and noting "Ehrlichman and then Haldeman went to see the President."

Rehearsing Testimony.

The courtroom scene turned tense again when Rhyne was allowed to question Buzhardt. He established that neither Buzhardt nor White House Attorney Leonard Garment had actually represented Miss Woods at her first court appearance, but were representing the President. Garment interjected to agree. Then Rhyne said flatly that Garment and another White House counsel, Samuel Powers, "had spent hours rehearsing her on her testimony." Garment immediately objected to the term "rehearsing" —and Sirica called all the attorneys to confer for some 25 minutes at his bench. Without explanation, Buzhardt then was excused from the stand.

The animosity between attorneys was evident throughout the week's hearings. Rhyne seemed strangely friendly with Prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste, who had interrogated Buzhardt. Several times when Garment or Buzhardt raised objections, Rhyne, seated at a table apart from them, muttered: "Those sons of bitches." Just what the estrangement means in terms of Miss Woods' relationship with the President in the whole tapes tangle was not yet clear. But she obviously was not taking the rap for the full obliteration of the Haldeman tape as it apparently had been assumed she would.

Humble Beginnings.

There was a certain poignancy in her predicament. Early in the first Nixon Administration, Miss Woods openly mistrusted the tactics of some of the Nixon aides, notably Haldeman, whose insensitivities contributed to the Watergate excesses. Now she, too, seemed caught in the morass.

Until recently, she was the envy of secretaries throughout the land—a spunky, hard-working woman who had risen high from humble beginnings. The daughter of a second-generation Irish American who worked in a pottery factory, Rose Mary Woods grew up in Sebring, Ohio (pop. 5,000), and learned her stenography in high school. Except for Older Brother Joe, who became an FBI agent and is now a member of the board of commissioners in Illinois' Cook County, her other brother and two sisters still live in Mahoning County, Ohio. Rose Mary also seemed content to stay near home: her first job was with the Royal China Co., her father's employer. But after the death of a beau and a personal bout with cancer, which she beat, she decided in 1943 to move to Washington. She landed a secretarial post on Congressman Christian Herter's select committee studying the Marshall Plan, a job that put her near many politicians. One of them was Freshman Congressman Richard Nixon.

The future President hired Miss Woods as his secretary in 1951, shortly after he moved to the Senate. She has been his indispensable office aide ever since, through all the crises, through all the winning and losing campaigns, the out-of-office years in California and New York in the 1960s, the official trips to South America, Western Europe, the Soviet Union and China. More than anyone outside his immediate family, Rose Mary knew what Nixon was thinking. She knew who was welcome on the telephone, which guests should be invited (or not invited) to the White House church services or to a party.

Though Miss Woods uncomplainingly followed Nixon to California and New York in his years out of office, friends doubt that she was very happy in that period. "I used to go to see Nixon at his New York law office regularly," says one. "And there was Rose, stuck away in a little cubbyhole office, typing his letters. She was really unhappy—she loved to have old friends stop in and gossip about everything that was going on in politics." The President's comeback, like all his ups and downs, was a deeply felt personal triumph for Miss Woods. Seated in the House gallery as he delivered his first State of the Union message in 1969—which she had typed for him—she savored the moment. "All of a sudden, there he was—and there I was," she later told friends.

Like many a wise secretary, she has influenced her boss by telling him —sometimes with an informal remark, sometimes with a frown or a smile —what people, publications or even policies

she likes. But Nixon's politics are her politics. "She is a totally devoted servant," says a longtime Nixon observer. "She would have been just as devoted to Richard Nixon if he had run on a Democratic or Socialist ticket." Loyalty pays, of course. She was one of the few Nixon aides ever to win a battle against Haldeman. When the White House Chief of Staff in 1969 tried to move her out of an office that opened directly into the Oval Office, she promptly—and successfully—went over his head and maintained her access.

Co-workers of Miss Woods are unanimous in their high regard for her. "She is, without question, one of the most decent persons on the White House staff," says a former colleague. "In a group of hard-boiled types, who then prided themselves on their superefficiency, she had heart and warmth, and she would go out of her way to help you out on a problem."

Great Girl.

Unmarried, Miss Woods dotes on nephews and nieces, both her own and the two whom she has informally adopted, Julie and Tricia. On trips abroad she and Pat Nixon have extended wardrobes by exchanging clothes (both are size 10), and she often dines with the Nixon family. But Miss Woods manages to keep up a life of her own as well. Her \$36,000 salary as Executive Assistant and Personal Secretary to the President allows her to live in an expensive co-op in the Watergate apartment complex.

Her kitchen is equipped with three ovens, though a frequent escort, Washington Advertising Executive Robert Gray, observes, "She doesn't cook, but she's good with ice cubes." Continues Gray: "Rose is a great girl, but she's a lousy date." One-third of an evening with her, he complains amiably, is pre-empted by interlopers who want to get messages through to the President. Though Rose politely takes them, says Gray, "she would rather dance than anything." When no dancing partner is available, the auburn-haired, matronly secretary has been known to take to the dance floor by herself, dancing solo to an orchestra's fiery tango rhythm. At home she often listens to music, using what a frequent visitor describes as "a really good tape system."

Though her usually sunny disposition makes her probably the most universally well-liked and respected person in the Nixon inner staff, she has a temper. She has flashed it in Judge Sirica's courtroom, and against politicians and journalists who criticized Nixon. During a recent Nixon press conference that she watched on television in her apartment, she sprang out of her chair and shouted epithets at the on-screen newsmen whose questions she considered impertinent. As the Watergate drama unfolds, a major question is just what might be the limits of the secretary's loyalty to her boss of nearly a quarter-century.

Last week's testimony before Judge Sirica raised bothersome questions. If White House Attorney Buzhardt learned of the trouble with the Haldeman tape in early or mid-October, why did he at first claim in court that the problem had only been discovered on Nov. 14? If Nixon knew about it on Oct. 1, why did he assure a conference of Republican Governors on Nov. 20 that all of the remaining tapes were "audible"? And why did no one from the White House inform the court much earlier?

A still more urgent question was whether the crucial 18 minutes of humming on the Haldeman tape could have been caused by what some Washington cynics have dubbed "Rose Mary's boo-boo." Apart from the fact that she would only take the blame for part of that gap, could her actions with the recorder have created such a noise at all?

Ample Time.

Buzhardt said that, without informing Miss Woods, he had used her recorder and re-created the overriding noise. On blank tape, one hum level was created, he said, when the secretary's electric typewriter and her Tensor lamp were both turned on; a different hum resulted when only the lamp burned. The recorder's internal circuitry was apparently capable of picking up the electrical "noise" from current flowing through the lamp and typewriter. Other experimenters claim to have duplicated a similar noise on tape when using similar equipment.

For the White House, however, the biggest problem with Miss Woods' testimony is that she insists that she could not have caused the full 18-minute noise. Thus someone else might have deliberately completed the obliteration of the Haldeman conversation. There certainly would have been ample time for any such tampering between Miss Woods' revelation to Nixon on Oct. 1 that she had made a mistake and Buzhardt's public revelation of the problem in court on Nov. 21.

A Government tapes expert consulted by TIME believes that there was such an alteration. This expert, who has done considerable bugging, wiretapping and taping for the Government, also raises the possibility that the tape submitted to the court might not be the original recording but a copy. It might have been made in a bungled attempt to alter and then splice parts of the initial tape. To this expert, the telltale sign is the series of clicks during the hum. Clicks, he reports, are produced when unskilled tamperers try to cut and splice tape. The buzzing sound then might even have been introduced to try to conceal the earlier attempt at deception.

Sirica has asked a panel of experts to examine the tapes. Selected by both the White House and the prosecutors, the panel includes some of the nation's most sophisticated sound and recording experts.* Last week the controversial June 20 tape reel was carried to New York City in a steel box to prevent any possible interference by magnetic fields. Six fully armed U.S. marshals escorted it on a train. It will be examined at the laboratories of the Federal Scientific Corp. in West Harlem. Also transported were the Uher tape recorder and Miss Woods' Tensor lamp and electric typewriter. The experts, who are expected to present preliminary findings to Sirica within two weeks, almost certainly will be able to determine whether Miss Woods' office equipment was capable of producing all or part of the recorded noise.

Some other experts consulted by TIME are confident that the skills of scientists in detecting tape alterations run well ahead of the talents of all but the most ingenious tamperers. Particularly through the use of spectral analysis techniques, in which various sound frequencies on a tape can be separated and studied, these experts believe that any heavy handed deception can be exposed.

One group of scientists at the University of Arkansas reports in a paper that "any alteration of the White House tapes could be detected in a timely fashion." The ear can be fooled and so can the oscilloscope (a device that can depict sound waves as electronically-generated graphs). But the spectral analysis may well determine whether a given recorder produced a specific recording, whether a tape has been cut or edited, whether it is an original or a copy. Any change in microphones or acoustical conditions would be suspect. Since a recorder gradually heats up as it plays, any sudden shift in temperature leaves a magnetic pattern on tape that might tip off an analyst to tampering.

Nail Down.

Physicist Alan V. Larson, who helped write the Arkansas paper, insists that the panel of experts will be able to either "verify or challenge" Miss Woods' version of what happened. "They'll nail her

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* —Richard H. Bolt, chairman of Bolt Beranek & Newman Inc., sound experts; Franklin S. Cooper, president of Haskins Laboratories; James L. Flanagan, head of acoustics research at Bell Telephone Laboratories; John G. McKnight, audio and magnetic recording consultant; Thomas G. Stockham Jr., computer science professor at the University of Utah; and Mark R. Weiss, vice president for acoustics research of Federal Scientific Corp.

right down," he predicts. Other experts are not so certain. Kenneth Stevens, a professor at M.I.T., agrees that "an amateurish" tampering job could be readily detected, but he is not sure that the panel will be able to say with certainty whether a specific tape has been altered.

The scientists widely suggest that the White House could help considerably by turning over a random sampling of a dozen or so of its other secret tapes for comparison with those under study. If the subpoenaed tapes show a different sound quality than the other tapes, the detection teams would have reason for suspicion and further study.

One problem revealed by Buzhardt about the subpoenaed tapes will also be examined by the technical panel. He said that there are often silent spots, and he attributes them to the voice-actuated recorders monitoring the President's offices. They could be triggered by other sounds, such as a passing truck or the ticking of a clock, even though no conversation was taking place. Ben-Veniste said the silences were several minutes long. Yet persons familiar with the White House system contend that it shuts off automatically if no additional sound is heard within about 10 seconds. As for a clock possibly triggering the mechanism, TIME'S Government expert scoffs: "Baloney. One microphone in the President's office was hidden in a clock."

There is a remote possibility that the Haldeman conversation might even be retrieved through computer-aided "signal enhancement" techniques. The erase mechanism on portable recorders is relatively weak, and a magnetic imprint of the original recording could remain on the Haldeman tape and might be amplified to intelligibility. But Buzhardt said that he had asked a National Security Administration expert about this and was told that such a recovery was "very remote." It clearly would be if the tape had been deliberately passed through a strong magnetic field to ensure total erasure.

Last week's developments demonstrated again that Nixon's Watergate defense has been remarkably inept. Asked who was to blame, one attorney representing a major Watergate defendant replied: "The White House lawyers." But he also sympathized with them, contending that the President handicaps his own defense by not completely leveling with even his own attorneys. Wan and worn out from defending the President on Watergate since last May, the loyal Buzhardt obviously has slipped out of presidential favor.

The fact that Buzhardt has not been kept fully informed even of the handling of tapes within the White House was shown pointedly in court. He admitted that he was surprised to learn that Miss Woods had nine original tapes in her possession as late as Monday of last week—despite agreement that only recently made copies of the tapes should be played so as to prevent harm to the originals. Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler undercut Buzhardt with faint praise, saying: "I don't

want to express criticism, publicly, of any person. He has been working very hard. We've made some mistakes during this period."

White House officials reported that John J. Sullivan, an Illinois appellate court judge in Chicago and a longtime Nixon friend, despite being a Democrat, will be added to Nixon's defense staff. After leaving the issue in doubt for two days, presidential aides finally denied rumors that Sullivan would replace Buzhardt as head of the defense group, which has now grown to 14 attorneys.

Visceral Dislike.

Almost in desperation, Nixon's aides also lashed out at others. Ziegler charged that the staff that Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski had inherited from Archibald Cox held an "ingrained suspicion and visceral dislike of this President and this Administration." Deputy Press Secretary Gerald Warren accused Jaworski's staff of leaking information to the press. Jaworski, however, has praised the staff for its "professionalism."

TIME has learned, meanwhile, that the White House has begun responding to pressure from Jaworski by turning over some documents requested long ago by Cox. That at least delays any court action by Jaworski against the President, though this remains a possibility if there is further stalling.

While all the new doubts about the integrity of Nixon's tapes set back the progress of Nixon's Watergate counterattack, he plunged on with it.

He addressed the convention of the Seafarers' International Union, whose President Paul Hall is under investigation by Prosecutor Jaworski's staff for a \$100,000 secret contribution to Nixon's campaign. The President inspired an ovation by declaring in a nautical note: "I can assure you that you don't need to worry about my getting seasick or jumping ship. It is the captain's job to bring that ship into port. I am going to stay at the helm until we bring it into port."

One night the President talked to six Senators in the third-floor solarium of the White House. His listeners reported that he had promised to make his tax returns public within a few days. Next day, however, Operation Candor hit another snag when Deputy Press Secretary Warren said that Nixon had not yet decided whether to release the full returns or only "information" from the returns.

A dinner in the State Dining Room with 25 Democratic Congressmen, mostly from the South, was no smashing success either. One listener described Nixon as "taut and extremely tense, gesturing wildly." North Carolina's Ike Andrews found Nixon relaxed and jovial but the situation awkward. Said he: "We were guests in his home—it makes it difficult to ask him questions. The first question was about the Middle East, and he took 21 minutes to answer it. There were a couple more innocuous questions, then somebody said politely, 'Thank you for this pleasant evening, but most of us thought we'd hear you make some explanation of Watergate.' "

Continued Andrews: "He said absolutely nothing revealing. After about five questions, Tiger Teague [Olin Teague of Texas] stood up and said we'd agreed to break it up at 9 o'clock. About half of us had our hands up, and the President agreed to one final question. It was all so pat. And as he left me there in the State Dining Room with my hand up, I thought, 'Good show.' "

Pressure rose from congressional Republicans for a far faster and fuller disclosure of all the Watergate facts. There is dismay among some of them that Nixon seems to be withdrawing into an ever-tighter circle of advisers, mainly Haig and Ziegler. Melvin Laird, popular on Capitol Hill, said that he will leave Nixon's staff as soon as Gerald Ford is confirmed as Vice President; Ford will assume Laird's advisory duties. Veteran politicians consider both Haig and Ziegler too inexperienced to handle what they see as essentially a political crisis for the President.

As the tapes debacle shows, however, Nixon's dilemma is more than political. The processes of law are still crowding him, especially in Judge Sirica's courtroom. While the White House staff predicts that Nixon will begin releasing detailed papers on such matters as his personal finances, tax deductions, and his intervention in settling antitrust cases against ITT, all that could be too late. Far more urgent for the President—if he can do it—is to explain why so many Watergate discussions have eluded a White House recording system that was once described as superefficient.

Rose Mary Woods' tortured explanation last week did not help. It is easy to sympathize with the plight of an able secretary who so dearly wants to aid her chief. But whether her bungled performance with the recorder was innocently accidental, or willful—or worse yet, did not take place at all—is still a question as tangled as the whole mess of the President's tapes.