



Lie detectors measure certain body functions said to change when the subject tells a falsehood, but authorities disagree over the accuracy of the tests.

Watergate Question

Could a Lie Detector Tell the Truth?

by George Michaelson

Why not use a lie detector (or polygraph) to see who is telling the truth about Watergate?

No sooner had the Senate hearings begun than this question arose, and Sen. Samuel Ervin (D., N.C.), chairman of the Senate's investigative committee, promptly dismissed it. The polygraph, he said, is nothing more than "twentieth-century witchcraft."

Notwithstanding the Senator's remarks, at least two Watergate figures (Gerald Alch, former lawyer for convicted conspirator James McCord, and Charles Colson, ex-White House aide) have voluntarily gone ahead and taken the lie-detector test; both were judged to be telling the truth. And the likelihood is that before the hearings are over, others will voluntarily take tests.

Which raises the question: Is the polygraph reliable, or is it "witchcraft"? Answers: Richard Paterson, president

of the 900-member American Polygraph Association: "When administered by professionals it is accurate about 95 percent of the time. The thing is, you've got to know what you're doing. There is no question the polygraph could be useful in the Watergate—or any other investigation."

Training operators

Currently there are some 1200 professional polygraph operators in the United States, and most have been trained by one of the 10 APA-accredited schools. Such training, which usually takes six months or more, involves learning how to operate the polygraph—a sensitive device which typically records changes in blood pressure, breathing rate and skin moisture, as the subject is responding to questions. (Presumably, if he is not answering truth-

fully, he will get anxious, and as a result his blood pressure will go up, his breathing will become uneven, and his hands will sweat.)

Actually, there is nothing new about using physical reactions to test for the truth. The ancient Chinese, operating on the principle that a guilty or anxious person's mouth doesn't secrete much saliva (in other words, becomes dry), would make a questioned person chew rice powder and then spit it out; if the powder came out dry, he was deemed a liar. The Bedouins of Arabia used the same principle: a suspect was forced to lick a hot iron, and if his tongue were burned—because there was no saliva on it—he was judged guilty.

Modern methods

The modern-day lie detector, of course, is considerably more sophisticated—and less uncomfortable—than these older methods. In fact, since its invention 50 years ago by a Berkeley, Calif., policeman, the polygraph has been steadily refined to the point where machines can record as many as 20 different physical reactions, and some of the data can be immediately processed and analyzed by a computer. More important, some authorities say polygraph operators themselves have become increasingly better trained and more proficient in using their machines.

The American Civil Liberties Union,

however, disagrees. A recent ACLU report says, "Today there is no valid statistical evidence that the polygraph is accurate. Because of the many variables and sources of error and the total reliance on predominantly unqualified examiners, it is unlikely that the polygraph machine as used today is accurate. Moreover, since there appears to be no truth in the fundamental assumption of the polygraph, that lying produces meaningfully recordable physiological data, it seems unlikely that current technology can ever lead to an accurate lie-detector machine."

Even polygraph operators concede that sometimes mistakes are made. Says Richard Arther, head of the private firm, Scientific Lie Detection Inc. who tested Charles Colson: "Any polygraph examiner who says he's never been fooled is lying himself. But the interesting thing is, that when we are fooled, it is almost always by someone with little education, who doesn't understand right from wrong. An intelligent subject, and especially one with something to lose if he's caught lying, will rarely, if ever, beat the polygraph."

Who's lying?

At this point, the principal use of lie detectors is in business—for pre-employment interviews or to investigate losses. The APA estimates that 25 percent of the major companies in the U.S. use polygraph tests to screen some

employees. Points out Victor Kaufman, a well-known polygrapher who operates in New York City's Wall Street area: "A company can't afford to take chances. You've got banks and trust companies down here with billions of dollars in their vaults, so of course it's worth \$50 for them to have potential employees tested out for honesty. True, we can't always spot a bad risk, but believe me, we don't miss many."

Screening applicants

In addition, there has been widespread use of lie detectors throughout the government and in the law enforcement agencies. The CIA and the Defense Department, for example, use the polygraph to screen applicants for sensitive positions. And in police departments in such large cities as Miami, Dallas and New Orleans, candidates are polygraph-tested for criminal records, drug use and other potential problems; and about one-third are dropped as a result of the tests.

The one area, however, where the polygraph has yet to make significant inroads is the place where, according to its proponents, it may eventually prove most valuable: in the courtroom. Until recently, polygraph evidence was considered too unscientific to be admitted as evidence in U.S. courts. But this idea may be changing. In the past year, a half-dozen or so civil and crim-

inal cases in various cities have been decided through voluntary use of polygraph evidence.

For instance, a few months ago in Queens, New York, a man brought a woman friend to court, claiming he had lent her \$910 which she refused to pay back; she denied receiving the loan. The judge had both take the lie-detector test, and the woman wound up having to pay back the loan.

They see progress

Not surprisingly, polygraph practitioners have been encouraged by these first glimmers of acceptance in the courts. "I think we're finally opening the door," says APA president Paterson. "The polygraph is coming to be accepted for the valuable tool it really is."

But there is still a long way to go. Summarizes polygraphist Kaufman: "There are still too many guys like Senator Ervin who think the polygraph is 'witchcraft,' for us to expect overnight acceptance. But eventually I'm confident we'll be welcomed by the courts, and even used extensively in such big cases like Watergate."

Maybe. In the meantime, "witchcraft" or not, it appears that the polygraph people are going to have to settle for only a minor part in the Watergate proceedings. For, like almost everything else in that case lie detectors too are not fully trusted.