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Rose Mary's diode

Ah, Gadzooks! Here we are back again with Miss Rose Mary Woods and her electric tape recorder. Once again Rose Mary has her foot on the foot pedal, her finger on the "record" button, her ear to the telephone, while for 18 and one half minutes something awful happens to precisely the most critical hunk of testimony imbedded in that Water-gate tape.

Only THIS time, deep in the innards of that Uher tape recorder, a defective diode is raising hell with the direct current voltage supply to the "record" and "erase" heads and THIS is why that precise 18 and one half minutes of recorded conversation between Mr. Nixon and Mr. Haldeman disappeared, to be replaced by a cranky buzz.

As they say in Bologna, "Bologna!"

The theory that a diode did the dirty is the latest "explanation" for why that Water-gate tape suffered its strategic disfigurement.

The diode hypothesis was advanced by Dektor Counterintelligence and Security Inc., an electronic snooper-pooper firm headquartered over a cookie company in Springfield, Virginia. According to the firm it undertook to get into the act just for the fun of it. The problem was intriguing, according to Allan D. Bell, the company president.

The Dektor explanation, in any case, found its way into Science Magazine, which printed a cautiously worded story, if not with a grain of salt then at least with a dish of caveats. From there it got fed into the news channels, as a counter to the expert testimony provided to Judge John J. Sirica by the panel of scientists he appointed to look into the strange erasure.

The panel, you may recall, concluded that the missing segment in the tape was caused by at least five separate erasures, deliberately done by human hands.

I suppose it is necessary to remind you that the original recording was not done on the Uher, but on one of the White House "bug" machines. The Uher was purchased so Rose Mary, Mr. Nixon's secretary, could play it back and attempt to transcribe it.

On the day in question, your honor, Rose Mary was listening to the tape, using a foot pedal control to start and stop the forward motion of the tape, a process with which any stenographer is familiar. You listen to a phrase, transcribe it, start the action again for another phrase, transcribe that, and so on.

That foot pedal controlling tape travel has nothing to do with the diode, defective or otherwise. Let me make that perfectly clear.

As for the diode, the most it could do if defective would be to overlay that buzzing sound noted by the expert panel and other listeners. I consulted a Uher expert here, C. R. Skinner, and that was his opinion. Recorded talk would remain.

The faulty diode, according to the Science Magazine account of the Dektor theory, could have "de-energized" the record and erase heads on Rose Mary's Uher. What nobody seems to have added is that a de-energized record or erase head is just a pretty little artifact of metal sitting there doing nothing.

If you are going to erase anything with an erase head the little cuss has to be energized. If you are going to record anything with a record head, same thing.

What Rose Mary said in her admittedly confused testimony was that she must have somehow hit the "record" button on her machine instead of the "stop" button when that telephone rang and she reached — pretty far — to answer it. I said at the time, as an old Uher owner and user, that somebody must have conned her into this idea, because the Uher doesn't work that way.

If you have the machine on "play" and are listening to a tape, and you accidentally hit the "record" button, why, that clever little machine just stops in its tracks and turns everything off but the motor so you won't accidentally spoil a tape. The "play" button pops up and is no longer operative.

Nope, you have to depress both the "play" and "record" buttons at the same time. They are arranged so you can't do it by accident. We are getting more obfuscation.