



William Raspberry

The Doomsday Machine

SOME PEOPLE in Springfield, Va., have developed a doomsday machine that could mean the end of capitalism, the American family, the jury system and maybe the world — at least this world as we know now.

"I'm talking about Dektor Counterintelligence and Security, Inc., and the machine they call a "Psychological Stress Evaluator" (PSE). What it is, is a new kind of lie-detector that works by analyzing a speaker's voice. Even over television.

The suspected liar needn't even know he's being checked.

You don't exactly have to be a genius to figure out the implications for some of our

most cherished traditions. Take a thing like the California primaries, now mercifully over. Suppose the voters had had their own Psychological Stress Evaluators during the campaigns, and particularly during the television debates.

Every candidate lies. Some get caught right away and they lose. Some, the winners, don't get caught until after the campaign is over, and then it doesn't matter much until the next election.

But suppose the voters knew, immediately and irrefutably, when a candidate was lying. You would have voters stuck with choosing among proven liars, which means they might not bother to vote at all. Or you would have the candidates stuck with telling the truth, which means most of them couldn't campaign at all.

PUT PSES in the hands of ordinary folk, and elective politics would be a thing of the past.

So, of course, would the family. Even Ann Landers knows that when it comes to marriage, truth is a greatly overrated commodity. There are some questions that husbands and wives ought not ask each other in the first place. But when they are asked, sometimes a lie is the only rational answer.

It's one thing to know "in your heart" that your mate is lying; it's another to have it in black and white, or whatever color the PSE happens to be. Silence is no solution, since that will certainly be interpreted in the worse possible light.

The free enterprise system would vanish from the face of the earth if the PSE branded as outright lies all the claims made for new cars, breakfast cereals, anti-perspirant deodorants and vegetable slicers.

Allan D. Bell Jr., who is president of Dektor, admitted to a reporter that his device could trigger "an overwhelming furor" as some of

its potential uses became clear—testing the veracity of government officials, for example.

Furor *nothing*: It could be positively devastating.

ACCORDING TO BELL, whose company has gained some fame as developer of electronic bugging and bugging devices, the PSE has one overwhelming advantage over the polygraph: You don't have to hook it to the suspected liar; the suspect doesn't have to know he's suspected.

Dektor says it tested the PSE by monitoring 25 statements of "To Tell the Truth." It picked the right person 94.7 per cent of the time, which is both phenomenal and frightening. More frightening still, it has been used in at least four Ellicott City, Md., trials, according to The New York Times.

It works, according to Bell, by measuring the inaudible frequency modulations of the voice that are present (along with the audible frequencies) under normal circumstances but disappear under stress. Lying produces stress. Bell says an operator has only to learn how to tell whether the stress is due to lying or to other pressures.

I don't understand any of this, but I don't doubt that it works—or that it is a bad thing.

The question isn't simply one of efficiency (that 94.7 per cent on "To Tell the Truth" means that the machine goofed 5.3 per cent of the time, which is fine for a TV show but potentially disastrous for a man on trial for his life) if they made it 100 per cent accurate, it might frighten me even more.

As long as there's any doubt as to the PSE's accuracy, it can be taken as something of a joke. Perfect it, and Allan D. Bell Jr. will go down in history as the man who invented Big Brother.