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To Tell the Truth

Allan D. Bell's doomsday machine, on the basis of a U.S. Army-contracted test, turns out not to be so devastating after all.

Bell, with whom I have talked a number of times about his Psychological Stress Evaluator (PSE), will understand that I am both disappointed and glad that his briefcase-sized device stands exposed as being a not-particularly-good-lie-detection device.

Bell, head of Dektor Counterintelligence & Security, Inc., of Springfield Va., is an inventor of espionage and counterespionage devices, and his proudest product had been the PSE fiendish thing that is supposed to measure stress in a subject's tape-recorded voice and show whether he is lying or not.

You don't have to hook him up with a lot of wires and things, as with the standard polygraph. In fact, he doesn't even have to know he's being checked out. You can record his voice surreptitiously—even off a radio or TV set—and still check him out with the PSE.

But a recently declassified report done for the Army Land Warfare Laboratory at Aberdeen Proving Ground says the PSE isn't very good—significantly less accurate, for instance, than the polygraph and in some ways less reliable than "judgments made on the basis of simply observing subjects' behavior."

That report, sprung loose by Rep. Harold V. Froehlich (R-Wis.), may be devastating for Bell and Dektor, but it's a major relief for me.

Not because I'm some sort of civil libertarian paragon but because, like most of us, I'm not. Beginning in the

height of the Senate Watergate hearings, I had tried to get Bell to tape some of the key witnesses, and especially some of the Nixon "explanations" on television.

He actually recorded the April 30 "Checkers II" explanation, in which the President accepted "responsibility" (but not blame) for the Watergate cover-up. But when we played it back, I had to agree with Bell: There wasn't anything for the PSE to evaluate. In 30 minutes of dealing with the major controversy of his administration and our time, Mr. Nixon had not uttered a single sentence of controversial fact—nothing that would permit the PSE to say yes he's lying or no he isn't.

Bell and I said we'd try again, but we never quite got around to it. I suspect he lost interest.

The point here, though, is that if it had been possible to prove mechanically — and surreptitiously — whether the President had spoken the truth, I was willing to prove it. I would have justified it on any number of bases: my own good intentions, the national good or simply a good column.

And the guy who chose at some future time to use it on you and me—to check our political loyalties, our tax returns or our marital fidelity—would also be able to tell himself that he had ample justification for his intrusion.

We would have protested Big Brother's newest assault on our personal freedom, but it would not have mattered; it would have been too late. For what became clear to me from my own reaction to the PSE is that it not only could be a doomsday machine in the hands of someone with a Big Brother mentality but that the very capability of

that sort of intrusion tends to make Big Brothers of all of us.

But Joseph Kubis of Fordham University, under contract with the Army, tested Bell's PSE and a similar device called the Voice Stress Analyzer and pronounced them relatively harmless.

The tests were conducted by taking several scores of students recruited for the purpose and dividing them into triads of "thief" (who had stolen a purse, "lookout" (who was party to the theft) and "innocent victim" (who knew that a theft had been committed).

Both voice-stress devices and the polygraph (all three operated by experienced technicians) were used, first to sort out the members of each triad and then to check each participant individually.

The examiners found the polygraph to be "an effective instrument of detection," with an overall accuracy of 78 per cent. The PSE technician, working with individual records, produced an accuracy rate of about 33 per cent—about what he might have been expected to do by guessing.

Allan Bell may have a logical explanation for that embarrassing showing, or he may be able to fix the thing so that it becomes significantly more accurate. He is a very clever inventor.

But I hope he doesn't. If I was afraid of his infernal device last spring, when he was acknowledging that the PSE could measure stress but couldn't always tell whether the stress was produced by lying or by something else, I would be absolutely petrified to learn that he had overcome that problem and could separate truth from lies nearly 100 per cent of the time.

I'd like to know how much truth we've been getting from our President, but I don't need to know that badly.