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The Tapes: Challenging the Experts

The gravest charges have now been convincingly made against Judge John J. Sirica's panel of experts on the Watergate tapes. They have been accused of tampering with vital evidence. They have also been accused of quite possible gross error.

If the charges stand up, the President and his staff are guiltless just where they have been found most guilty, in the matter of doctoring the tapes. This is startling enough. But what makes the charges far more startling is their source.

The source is Science. This magazine is the weekly organ of much of the American scientific community; and the editors of Science are not much more fond of President Nixon than the editors of the most anti-Nixon newspapers you can think of. Yet here is Science galloping to the President's rescue in the manner of Young Lochinvar.

The Science article, written by Nicholas Wade, concerns the ultra-famous Watergate tape with the 18½-minute gap filled only by a buzz. Judge Sirica's experts found that the gap was unquestionably made by purposeful erasure of the tape. This was said to be proven by electronic stop/start "signatures" numbering at least five, and perhaps as many as nine.

To make their study, the five experts, chaired by Richard H. Bolt, were given the Uher 5000 tape recorder used by the President's personal secretary, Miss Rose Mary Woods, plus the original of the tape with the 18½-minute gap. The whole strange plot revolves around the fact that the Uher 5000 recorder was defective, to the point of breaking down in the hands of the five experts.

When this happened, the evidence-tampering occurred — no doubt innocently yet quite unchallengeably. By their own admission, the experts "opened up the interior" of the machine, replaced a diode bridge and tightened screws and probably ground connections as well. In other words, the Uher 5000, a most material piece of evidence, was physically altered in a most material way.

It may therefore be impossible, hereafter, to test the machine's possible malfunctions before it came into the hands

of the panel of experts. With a view to such tests, however, Judge Sirica has already been asked for the defective diode bridge that was replaced, plus the exact record of the other changes made in the Uher 5000 by the expert panel. No answer has as yet been forthcoming. It even appears possible that no record was kept by the experts and the defective diode bridge was simply thrown away.

This is all vitally important, in turn, because of a peculiar characteristic of the Uher 5000 recorder. A voltage drop resulting from malfunction can just as easily produce the stop/start signatures found by the expert panel as can a purposeful effort to erase the tape.

Incredibly enough, by their own admission in court, the expert panel tested this question of erasure by malfunction on a Sony recorder instead of on the Uher 5000. The Sony does not have the Uher's peculiar characteristic above noted. Thus the possibility of erasure of the tape by malfunction was dismissed after a phony test in a shockingly slipshod way.

To make the whole tangle stranger, none of the foregoing might have surfaced if it had not been for a group of ex-military intelligence officers. These men have formed their own little electronic company, Dektor Counterintelligence and Security Inc., Springfield, Va.

The company makes de-bugging equipment and the like. Its head, Allan D. Bell, is a special expert on tape recorders — whereas, none of Judge Sirica's experts has ever had any known practical experience with tape recorders.

Bell read the report of the expert panel, smelled a rat and wrote another report for his own amusement, concluding that "power supply problems" (in the Uher 5000) were an "equally feasible alternative" to the purposeful erasure explanation of the Sirica experts.

Bell's company does no government work, has no White House connections, and got no reward for the Bell report. One evening, however, another officer of the company got "fed up with the circus on television." Hence, he called Miss Rose Mary Woods' lawyer, Charles Rhyne. Thus the Bell report's challenge to the Sirica experts later found

its way into Science, which supports the challenge in its careful article.

There are still plenty of other technical complications, concerning that telephone call by Miss Woods, for instance, that supposedly had something to do with the gap in the tape. The existence of an "equally feasible explanation" does not mean that the Sirica experts' explanation is quite certainly wrong either.

Yet in this country, a man is presumed innocent until he is solidly proven guilty. The opposite rule has clearly been followed in this case, and with the President of the United States. So this is not a very pretty story.

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