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... Smoke on the Screen

The cleverness of the man is almost unreal. He has this uncanny way of sending you forever chasing after smoke—and the wrong smoke at that.

The headline stretched across the top of the New York Times last Tuesday makes my point very well. "Nixon Accepts Onus for Watergate, but Says He Didn't Know About Plot." (IMM)

The truth is, President Nixon's acceptance of "responsibility" was a definition of his office, not a gesture of magnanimity. More importantly, he did not say he didn't know about the plot. He only left the vague feeling that he had said something like that.

It isn't my uncommon perceptivity that made me see this rhetorical cleverness but a bit of unaccustomed deviousness. Let me explain—confess?—what I'm talking about.

Last June, I reported on an invention of one Allan D. Bell Jr. of Annandale, Va., called a Psychological Stress Evaluator (PSE). Bell's device is a super-sophisticated lie-detector, with one tremendous advantage over the familiar polygraph: You don't have to hook it up to the subject; the subject doesn't even have to know he's being checked.

According to Bell, who is president of Dektor Counterintelligence and Security, Inc., Springfield, Va., and a gifted inventor, the PSE works by measuring the inaudible frequency modulations of the voice that are present under normal circumstances but disappear when the speaker is under the stress that lying produces.

The PSE does one other thing that the polygraph can't. It will work off a radio, tape-recording or television set.

Now you're with me. When I learned a week ago that the President was about to make a TV address on Watergate, I naturally thought of Allan Bell, and proposed that we do the obvious rotten thing.

Bell, who knows that I have my doubts about his infernal machine, and who is himself aware of the limitations both of the device and of its human operators, agreed to the experiment. He would tape the speech Monday night, and on Tuesday afternoon we'd get together and see what we could see.

I phoned him on Tuesday, not to confirm our appointment but to confirm my suspicion: There was nothing on the tape—or in the speech—for Bell's PSE to get a grip on.

The man had talked long enough to fill nearly half of a newspaper page, had gone through a whole range of emotional postures and gear-shifts, had spoken on the single biggest controversy in the world today, one in which he is personally involved.

And he hadn't uttered one single sentence of controversial fact.

He seemed to come close a few times. "Last June 17, while I was in Florida trying to get a few days' rest after my visit to Moscow, I first learned from news reports of the Watergate break-in."

(Many of his harsher critics will grant the likelihood that he wasn't party to the advance planning of the break-in; the nagging questions center around the cover-up after the fact.)

"I repeatedly asked those that conducted the investigation whether there was any reason to believe that members of my administration were in any way involved. I received repeated assurances they were not."

(That comes close to an assertion of controversial fact, but could just as well imply deliberately crafty questioning and cagey responses. Still not much for the PSE.)

"I want to stress that in accepting these resignations (of Haldeman and Ehrlichman) I mean to leave no implication whatever of personal wrongdoing on their part..."

(There's much less there than meets the eye. He didn't say his top aides were innocent of any wrongdoing; he didn't even say he *thought* they were innocent. He merely uttered the indisputable, that he didn't want to imply their guilt.)

And so throughout the speech. The ghouls among us kept listening for the dramatic, clear-cut denial: "John Mitchell, my chief law enforcement official, long-time friend, campaign manager and confidant, may have known about

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the bugging, at least after the fact, but I swear he never said a word about it to me, even after it hit the papers."

Or: "I don't believe for a minute that anybody close to me, with the possible exception of John Dean, had anything to do with Watergate, before or after the fact."

Or at least: "I've known about the break-in, the bugging and the cash contributions since last summer, but it was only last month that I realized how much of this was going to get out."

Obviously, the President was going to say no such thing. He was neither going to confess complicity in the scandal nor risk being caught in a bald-faced lie.

Upon honest reflection, I have to say that, while I was disappointed in the speech, I can't imagine what else I would have had him add. (I could mention that he passed up at least four good places to end the speech, but that's another matter.)

So having nothing to say, he said it, after first taking care to give the eggheads, the effete snobs and the Nixon-haters something to chew over: the sentimentality of the speech, the family photo, the Lincoln bust, the God Bless America and the question: Will Middle-America buy it?

But nobody will ever be able to go through his yellowing copy of the May 1, 1973, Washington Post and say, "Aha! The President lied."