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Inadvertent Erasure Called Hard to Do

By John Saar

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The service manager of an electronics company distributing the tape recorder used by President Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, is skeptical that she could have inadvertently erased 18 minutes of a Watergate tape as she has claimed.

Contacted at the Los Angeles headquarters of Martel Electronic Sales Inc., which markets the German-made Uher recorder used by Miss Woods in transcribing the tapes, Carl Bennett said yesterday the chances of such a mistake were "poor . . . very, very low because of the way it is designed."

Bennett and other recording experts contacted emphasized there are built-in safeguards on nearly every tape recorder against the kind of accidental erasure described by Miss Woods.

"To erase you have to manually depress two buttons simultaneously," said Bennett. "If you press either one first it won't do anything."

[It could have happened, Bennett told the Los Angeles Times, but "there is no reason at all" for a competent secretary to make the error.]

"It's not easy to do at all. It's hard for me to see where it's a mistake," the service manager said in a phone interview.

The only other way erasure could have occurred, Bennett said, would be if Miss Woods had been using the tape recorder with a microphone which has a one-stage record mechanism.

"It was unlikely though, that as a secretary, Miss Woods would be using the microphone," he said. "Most secretaries don't use a mike. They use a foot switch which has 'play' and 'rewind,' but no 'record' capability."

Bennett explained that for Miss Woods to have accidentally put the tape recorder into an erase position, as she testified before Judge John J. Sirica yesterday, it would be necessary to press the foot pedal to 'play' and simultaneously press a key labeled 'record.'

Bennett also was puzzled by the source of the hum which replaces the President's conversation with H. R. Haldeman on an 18-minute portion of the tape. "That baffles me," he said, "there shouldn't be anything but a slight hissing noise. There's nothing in the equipment which could cause that tone."

Bennett described the Uher 5000 model used by Miss Woods as "a professional piece of gear which sells like hot cakes" at \$500. Principally used for dictation, the service manager said it was also used for "more or less so-called buggings."

Tim Maddaloni, service manager for the Sanyo Electric Inc., cited possible exposure of the tapes to a magnetic field to explain erasure. Told it happened on the machine, Maddaloni said, "That would be a little hard to believe, I'm afraid. I'm for the President, but it's a little hard to swallow."

An executive for the Sony Corp. of America, Fred Tushinsky, explained the commonly used safeguards against accidental erasure as an "interlock." Most such systems, he said, require two separate and deliberate actions—depression of the 'record' button and then engagement of the 'forward' or 'play' control.

"I know of no commercial tape recorder sold for consumer use that does not include an interlock against accidental erasure," said Tushinsky, a marketing vice president.

Asked to rate the chances of someone accidentally erasing recordings, he said, "I think it would be very hard to do it accidentally."