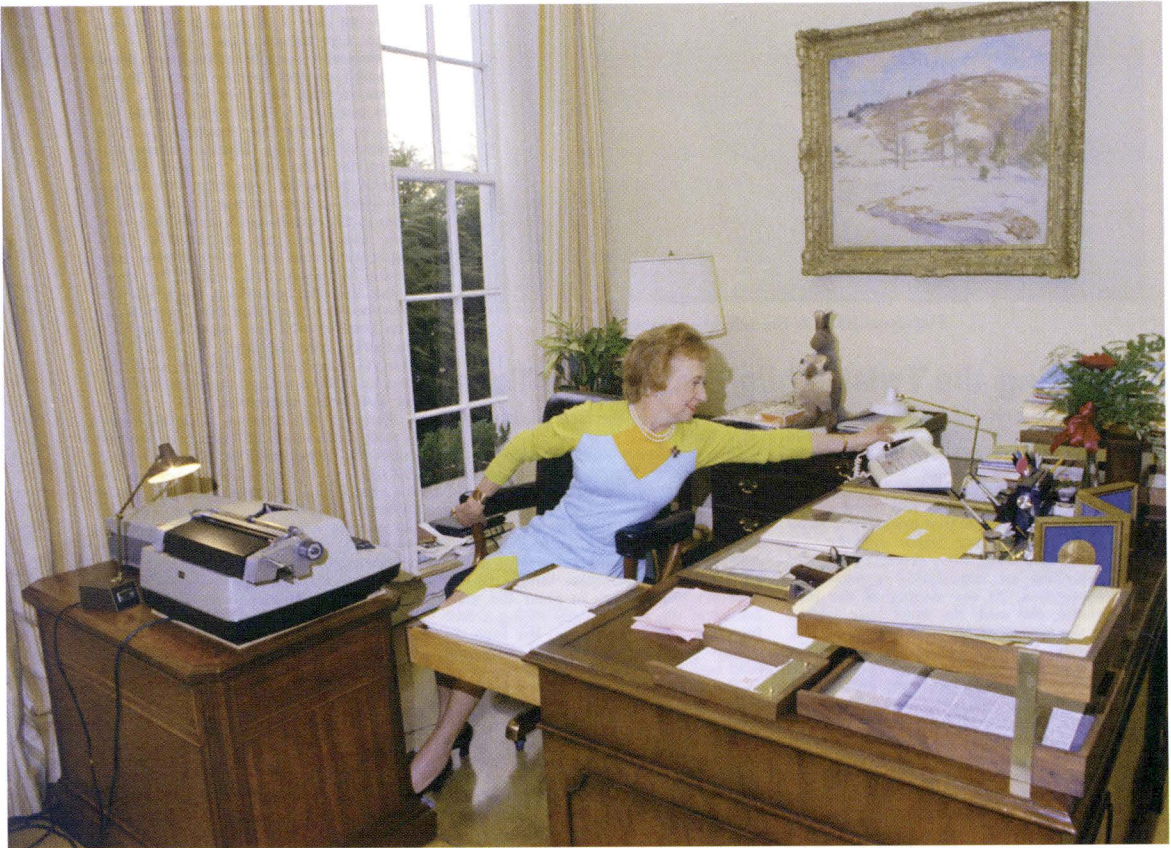


SUSAN SCHUPPLI / from **Stretch**









Joe Heiberger—Washington Post

Universal 5000: Is the talk gone forever?

Doing the Twist While Erasing the Tape

How plausible is Rose Mary Woods's explanation for the erased tape, and what might experts still learn from it?

Technicians familiar with the Uher Universal 5000 recorder-playback machine that Miss Woods was using all but unanimously agree that her story is physically possible, but highly unlikely.

For one thing, Miss Woods's story also described an improbable sequence of contortions. At the ringing of the telephone, she said, she must have jabbed at the tape machine with her right hand, missing the STOP button and hitting the RECORDING instead; then she twisted backward and to the left, grabbing a telephone 5 feet away from her typewriter; she tucked the receiver between her shoulder and chin and may even have stabbed the appropriate button on the telephone with the same hand; then she settled down for a five-minute telephone call, taking occasional notes; and through all this action, her left toe was set firmly on the tape machine's pedal

control, allowing the tape to run on and erase itself.

In a courtroom demonstration of this scenario, Miss Woods took her foot off the pedal even before picking up the imaginary phone—and at best, her theory explains less than a third of the eighteen-and-a-quarter minute erasure. And even if the contortions were granted, said Uher distributor Sidney Rosen, it didn't make sense to press the STOP button at all, since simply lifting a foot from the pedal would stop the tape. In court, Miss Woods testified that she used both techniques on occasion.

The machine could have erased all eighteen minutes of the tape in about twenty seconds if Miss Woods had pressed RECORDING and hit the foot pedal hard, putting it into a "fast rewind" mode. But that would have meant that Miss Woods had already listened to the missing conversation, and she testified that she had heard none of it. It would also have left a high-pitched squeal on

the tape, not the low hum that is heard throughout the gap. That hum, experts say, might have come by induction from Miss Woods's high-intensity desk lamp, her electric typewriter, or the recorder itself—but only if the machine were in a normal, forward recording mode.

Proximity: Presidential counsel J. Fred Buzhardt offered another theory. In experiments with the Uher recorder, Buzhardt testified, he had approximated the hum by placing the machine in close proximity to Miss Woods's lamp and typewriter. The noise, he said, fell in volume when the typewriter was turned off—which might account for an audible drop in the hum's pitch about five minutes into the gap. Buzhardt's clear implication was that Miss Woods concluded her phone call, shut off her typewriter, and did something else while the tape ran on for another thirteen minutes. The trouble with this version was that Buzhardt acknowledged he was only able to reproduce the hum by using the keys on the recording machine—without the foot pedal connected.

However the erasure occurred, there is a slender chance that the conversation might be recovered. At the weekend, the tape was delivered in a steel box by six armed U.S. marshals to New York's Federal Scientific Corporation, to find out—among other things—whether computerized "signal enhancement" techniques might be able to restore an audible signal. Dr. Thomas Stockham of the University of Utah, one of six technical experts invited by Judge John Sirica to examine the tapes, told NEWSWEEK that it would be "premature and guessey" to make any predictions but said he hoped to "have those answers in January."

Most experts, however, discounted any chance of recovering intelligible conversation. "If it had been a simple erasure there might have been a chance," says Harold K. Lipset, a San Francisco investigator who has worked with electronic surveillance and detection devices for more than two decades. "But with that hum on top, that conversation is gone."