Capitol Punishment

Nevermore There Came a Tapping

By Art Buchwald

The Supreme Court's decision which ruled that the Justice Department could not bug or wiretap anyone without court approval has put a pall on Washington.

In a town where status symbols are essential, being bugged by the Justice Department was the highest honor the government could bestow on one of its citizens. It meant the person was important enough to warrant surveillance and his work was so meaningful that the FBI was worried about him.

One of the biggest gambits of a lawyer or lobbyist in Washington was to say to the client, "We'd better not discuss this on the phone, I think my line is tapped."

The client would be immediately impressed and the lawyer or lobbyist would then double his fee.

The same went for newspapermen stationed in this town.

A wise correspondent would call his editor and say, "Jeff, pass the word at the paper that if anyone at the office has anything important to say, not to call me at home. They've got me bugged. They're furious at the White House about the story I did on urban development, and I hear the word is out to find out who leaked it. If I have anything important to report I'll call you from a pay phone."

Most militant protest groups are disturbed by the Supreme Court ruling.

Sam Labarbe, the leader of the Students Committee Against Students, told me, "The Supreme Court took all fun out of protesting. We used to sit for hours making obscene phone calls to friends telling Nixon, Agnew, John Mitchell and Kleindienst where to go. Now it's hardly worth the dime."

At cocktail parties almost everyone in Washington talked about being bugged. This is how the conversation would go:

"Helen, when I called you yesterday, I had the most terrible connection."

"Yes, everyone is complaining about it. Charles told me last night that he heard they had a 24-hour tap on his line and it was weakening the circuit."

"Why would they want to tap Charles? He's certainly a small fish in this town."

"I resent that remark, Ethel, Charles has a very important job as far as the authorities are concerned, and we've been tapped for over a year. When was the last time anyone tapped William's telephone?"

"We've been tapped through three different administrations."

"You made that up. Who cares what William has to say?"

The host would then interject, "I wish you girls wouldn't talk so loud. I know someone has planted a bug in the chandelier."

It was so important to be tapped in Washington that it is rumored many people used to install their own bugs in the wall and show them to friends as the real thing.

I know one columnist who always insisted we walk in the garden when we talked about anything, as he claimed all his paintings had been wired by the FBI.

It's going to be hard in Washington to find something to replace the status of being bugged or wiretapped. The only answer is that since the government can't do it, private industry will have to take over.

This could, in effect, be what the bugging attempt of the Democratic National Committee was all about. Thanks to the five men who were caught trying to bug the Democratic headquarters, the Democrats have more status now than they ever had before. Until the incident, no one in Washington had ever heard of the Democratic Party. But since the incident, its prestige has risen and, for the first time, the Democrats are being taken seriously in 1972.

© 1972, Los Angeles Times