

Big Brother Is Listening ^{Box} 11/17/68

The FBI buggings in the Black-Baker cases did much more than taint a politically interesting prosecution. It may be that guilty persons will escape punishment because the FBI blundered. That would be unfortunate but not disastrous. Much more serious, however, is the pall which this bugging puts on the cherished American right of privacy.

It is now apparent that the FBI conceives of itself as Big Brother, entitled to eavesdrop on private conversations when it considers it expedient to do so. You may not be much concerned about Bobby Baker's privacy. But suppose that you had had occasion to talk with him during the period when he was using a room where his conversations were being monitored. Or suppose that tomorrow you have occasion to talk with someone else—a lobbyist, a lawyer, a businessman, a public official—whose private affairs the FBI, without telling anyone, had decided to investigate. Your own privacy would then become very intimately involved.

It is all very well to say that your private life is an open book and that you say nothing in private which you would be ashamed to have made public. No one who says that really means it. Every one of us speaks unguardedly to intimates—about business matters, about family affairs, about personalities, about private problems or embarrassments, about hopes or plans or ambitions, about political opinions, about the amusing or troubling yet confidential incidents of the day at home or in the office. And the ability to communicate about such things in confidence with trusted relatives or friends or office associates is an indispensable attribute of freedom.

The FBI has clouded this kind of confidence. No one can be quite certain that he is safe from its bugs—its hidden instruments for electronic snooping. Here in the Capital especially no one can know that Big Brother is not listening in on him or on someone somewhere who talks to him. There is little doubt that this facilitates law enforcement. But there is even less doubt that it inhibits conversation. It makes thoroughly law-abiding people watch their words. It corrupts free communication. The terrible evil in official eavesdropping lies not so much in what it may monitor and use as in what it may silence and leave unspoken.