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Capitol Punishment . . .

By Art Buchwald

The Father of the Bug

JUST WHEN things were getting dull in Washington, Robert Kennedy, the former Attorney General and J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, plunged headlong into a bitter brouhaha over who gave permission to bug certain elements of our society whilst violating their constitutional rights.



Buchwald

It is not general knowledge, but the bugging of telephones has been going on in the United States for almost a hundred years.

The first known case of the Government bugging someone took place on March 10, 1876, in the laboratories of Alexander Graham Bell in Boston, Massachusetts. Mr. Bell had been working for some time on a new speaking device which he called the telephone. In the next room was his assistant, Tom Watson. One day Bell said into his mouthpiece, "Watson, come here, I want you."

Watson rushed into the next room, threw his arms around Bell, and the telephone was born.

BUT unbeknownst to both Watson and Bell, a third person was listening in on their conversation. It was a young Government investigator named J.E. Hoover, who was out to make a name for him-

self in the Justice Department.

J.E. took the next train for Washington. Breathlessly he rushed in to see President Grant's Attorney General who happened to be a man named Edwards Pierrepont. In the presence of Department officials he played the primitive, crackling tape for them.

Attorney General Pierrepont couldn't believe his ears. "What hath God wrought?" he said.

J.E. said, "you have heard a tape of the first conversation ever bugged on a telephone."

"What the hell's a telephone?" the Attorney General wanted to know.

"It's a new invention by some Scotsman named Alexander Graham Bell. He wasn't a citizen, so I was very curious as to what he was up to. I think 'Watson, come here, I want you,' is some sort of code, but I haven't had time to break it down yet."

"But what good is bugging a telephone?" the Attorney General demanded.

"I'D RATHER put it another way, Sir. What good is a telephone if it isn't bugged? Don't you see what this invention means? If there are going to be telephones, we can listen in on them, and we can catch spies, and crooks and Communists, and bookies, and juvenile delinquents and even lawyers."

"I don't know, J.E. The whole thing smells uncon-

stitutional to me," the Attorney General said.

"But how else are we going to get the rats if we don't bug them on the telephone?" J.E. demanded.

"I'm the Attorney General of the United States, J.E., and I can't condone wire-tapping of any kind unless it's in the national interest. On the other hand, if I didn't know about it, then I wouldn't be condoning it, would I?"

"Exactly my thoughts, Sir. Just sign this letter saying you don't know anything about me tapping telephones and it will be all the authority I need."

Little did Edwards Pierrepont know when he signed the letter that every other Attorney General after him would sign a similar letter until this year, when the Supreme Court wanted to know what was going on.

Alexander Graham Bell may have invented the telephone, but it was young J.E. Hoover who really made the invention pay off for law-abiding Americans everywhere.

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