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Kissinger And Helms

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, May 17—The more you analyze the testimony in the Watergate scandals, the more you have to wonder about the closed atmosphere or "don't call me" system around the White House in which all these extraordinary events occurred.

Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman were victims of it, both of them described by the President as exemplary public servants, which in his mind they undoubtedly were. But now even Henry Kissinger is charged with dubious conduct, because he too is apparently involved in cooperating too much with the White House closed-circuit system.

How could Mr. Kissinger agree to bugging his own friends and colleagues on the National Security Council staff in the White House, it is asked. And how could Richard Helms, former head of the C.I.A., allow the agency to be used in a domestic conspiracy, without challenging the White House staff and expressing his doubts and objections directly to the President?

Probably the simplest part of the answer is that the best of men love power and position, and do things or fail to do things that keep them in power even when they have their own moral doubts. The men around President Johnson in the White House had a phrase for it: At the end of tiresome arguments about whether Johnson's policies in Vietnam were right or wrong, they would argue that "we have only one client—the President of the United States."

This, of course, was precisely the fatal assumption of men like Haldeman and Ehrlichman, only they didn't put it into such a tidy and vulnerable phrase. But Kissinger and Helms were never in such close personal relationships with Mr. Nixon. They never had such ties of loyalty over so many years, and yet somehow they went

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along with ambiguous and dubious things that troubled them morally, and they now find themselves in a very awkward position.

One has to be very careful with this discussion of power, ambition, loyalty and morality. It involves delicate motives and private philosophies and calculations no outsider can possibly know. For example, before he left Washington for Paris to try to save the Vietnam peace agreement, Mr. Kissinger made clear to General Haig and others in the White House—one source says also to the President personally—that if his moral authority was in question as a result of his part in the telephone bugs of his own staff, then he would resign at once.

It is hard to see how this would improve any part of this dismal business. Things are bad enough as they are with the critical Brezhnev meeting, the arms control and SALT talks, and the European conference coming up. The atmosphere of the Nixon system is really at the bottom of this whole thing, and it has to be understood.

According to F.B.I. sources, the White House, worried about leaks of security information in the newspapers, and even suspicious about Kissinger, who was known to have friends in the press, authorized the taps on the reporters and on Kissinger's staff and then asked him to cooperate in the operation, and talked to the late J. Edgar Hoover about the importance of making the Government's communications secure.

Mr. Kissinger went along with this. Some reports say he took the lead in it; but either way, in the atmosphere of doubt, suspicion and even hostility on the Haldeman-Ehrlichman side of the White House, he either had to oppose the bugging, in which case he would have been suspected of trying to cover up his own people, or he had to go along with it, or oppose it on moral grounds and get out.

Maybe he should have got out, at least after he had negotiated the cease-fire in Paris, and maybe Dick Helms should have gone to the President when the President's men were getting

the C.I.A. involved in improper and even illegal activities; but the point is that the Nixon personality and the Nixon staff system don't encourage candor. They require loyalty and obedience, not doubts, questions or criticisms. The Nixon system is to work through the staff. The staff is suspicious of anybody who questions what the President is doing. There are no rules that say Kissinger and Helms cannot defy the system and insist on confronting the President, but it is hard to remember a man around Washington in the last generation who walked into the Oval Room of the White House and challenged the President, his policies and his staff.

Staff officers, no matter who they are, don't put their careers on the line. Cabinet members from John Gardner under Johnson to George Romney under Nixon, tend to swallow their differences with Presidents and go away in silence.

It takes a bold man to tell the President and his staff the truth, no matter how much it hurts. And this Mr. Nixon has discouraged from the time he walked into the White House.