

That Eavesdropping On Soviet Leaders



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WE HAVE BEEN accused of compromising an intelligence operation, perhaps even jeopardizing the life of an agent, inside the Soviet Union.

Let us set the record straight.

More than two years ago, we were tipped off that the Central Intelligence Agency had managed to eavesdrop on the private conversations of Kremlin leaders.

We checked out the story with a CIA source who had access to the transcripts. He confirmed that the CIA was intercepting the telephone traffic between the limousines of Soviet bigwigs.

Unfortunately, he said, they didn't hold strategy sessions in their limousines. The CIA picked up small talk, however, which provided an insight into the personalities of the likes of party chief Leonid Brezhnev, Premier Alexei Kosygin and President Nikolai Podgorny.

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THE TRANSCRIPTS revealed that the Soviet leaders gossip about one another and complain about their ailments.

Our sources said the transcripts showed that the Kremlin chiefs were aware the CIA was listening to them. Anything they already knew, he agreed, should be safe for the American people to be told.

Therefore, it should do no harm to write about the eavesdropping operation, said our source. He cautioned, however, that the monitored conversations didn't make clear whether the Soviet leaders had figured out how we did it.

We published a careful story on September 16, 1971, about the eavesdropping.

"For obvious security reasons," we wrote, "we can't give a clue as to how it's done. But we can state categorically that for years the CIA has been able to listen to the kingpins of the Kremlin banter, bicker and backbite among themselves."

The following December, we quoted from secret White House minutes to show that President Nixon had lied to Congress and the public about the India-Pakistan conflict.

This brought the President's gumshoes down on our neck with a vengeance. The undercover work was done by the Plumbers, the bizarre para-police unit whose operatives ran around in CIA wigs and committed foolish crimes.

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THE BEWIGGED ONES, among other things, began checking into our account of the Kremlin bugging. This aroused Richard Helms, then the CIA chief, who invited me to lunch on March 17, 1972.

He asked me not to mention the eavesdropping operation in my book, "The Anderson Papers." He acknowledged that the Kremlin leaders knew their conversations had been monitored. But he pleaded with me to keep quiet and urged me particularly never to mention how the conversations were intercepted.

Accordingly, I omitted the references from my book and left it to others to reveal the secret monitoring method.

Nevertheless, the White House has seized upon this affair to justify the President's claim of national security in the Plumbers case.