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The Purloined Papers

The case of the purloined papers drizzles on and on. The cast of characters is irresistible: Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger; the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Adm. Thomas Moorer, two other admirals, a sly naval yeoman; the White House "plumbers", and so on and on. Why, you could make a perfect melodrama with a cast like this! Many people naturally hope to do so.

For those who have not been following the case, the basic plot to date is plain enough. For a considerable period during the previous Nixon administration, a highly trusted naval yeoman, Charles E. Radford, was assigned for duty with the National Security Council. While on this duty, Radford regularly took copies of the most secret Security Council papers and passed them back to the Pentagon.

Some of the papers reached Admiral Moorer. Yeoman Radford has further testified that he began this practice of purloining papers because his first boss in the Security Council apparatus, rear Adm. R. C. Robinson, asked him "to do a job for the joint chiefs."

The purloining was then discovered. The White House "plumbers" lumbered into the act, hotly followed by their chief, John Ehrlichman. All sorts of sinister charges were bandied about. But in the end, President Nixon took no punitive action against anyone; so we are hearing further sinister charges today.

If all this seems a mite sordid, the answer is that it was of course sordid. In every administration, government has its sordid patches and episodes. But if all this also sounds a mite

bewildering, the answer is to please recall the way the government really worked in 1970 and 1971.

At that period, Dr. Kissinger, working under the President and solely for the President, was making virtually every foreign policy decision of any consequence. With respect to the Vietnamese war and some other urgent situations, Dr. Kissinger, again working under the President, was also making many military decisions of the highest importance.

To put it mildly, this state of affairs was not immensely enjoyed by the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense of that period, who were William Rogers and Melvin Laird. It would again be putting it mildly to say that both Laird and Rogers hated Kissinger's guts.

Furthermore, both men saw all policy decisions from a viewpoint diametrically opposite to the Kissinger viewpoint. Both men thought of today rather than tomorrow. Both put politics ahead of substance. Both feared the bold decisiveness in action and misunderstood the subtlety in planning and negotiation, that were and indeed still are the main Kissinger hallmarks.

So you had a situation in which Dr. Kissinger was perpetually at daggers drawn with "the bureaucracy" — his own shorthand phrase for the State and Defense Departments. Not only this, moreover. "The bureaucracy" would have cheerfully used daggers on Dr. Kissinger, and in view of the problems involved in physical assault, "the bureaucracy" quite regularly used all possible daggers on the Kissinger policy decisions.

This had two practical consequences relevant to the case of the purloined papers. On one hand, Dr. Kissinger went to enormous lengths to keep secret all major policy decisions until they were accomplished facts, beyond being much damaged by "the bureaucracy." By the same token, "the bureaucracy" also went to enormous lengths to find out what the devil Dr. Kissinger was currently up to, generally with limited success.

No one with practical knowledge of government can doubt that the foregoing was the matrix in which the case of the purloined papers really originated. Just how this happened, one cannot tell; for the case, by now, has become a lunatic tangle of contradictions and suspensions.

The main things to understand, however, are quite simple. It was normal for Dr. Kissinger to play his cards close to his chest. It was normal, again for those who so loathed him to want to know what was on those cards.

No matter who did what to whom, however, it was never much more than standard infighting of the usual intra-governmental type. Hence it was also normal, finally, for the President to say, "Let's shut up about it," when he made that decision at the end of 1971.

Unless appearances deceive, in short, this case of the purloined papers is no occasion for worry or alarm or silly hints about "military takeover." Infighting is endemic in all governments. Instead, one should be extremely grateful that the government is no longer manned quite so strangely and discordantly, even to the extent of possessing exceptionally effective State and Defense Departments.