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Wiretaps: The Myth of National Security

The latest fuss over Henry Kissinger obscures the truly interesting question which now arises in regard to the national security wiretaps. The question is: Why did John Doar, as head of the impeachment inquiry being conducted for the House Judiciary Committee, bother to look into the taps at all?

The answer, of course, is that the wiretaps had almost no connection with national security. They come within the ambit of an impeachment inquiry because a mountain of evidence shows that the taps were a particularly dirty business done in violation of the Constitution and the laws and even internal governmental procedures for reasons of White House intrigue.

Consider, first, the discovery of the wiretaps. The records compiled from the taps were not found in the files of the FBI where such material is usually stored. On the contrary, they were found, largely by accident, in the White House office of John Ehrlichman. But what were they doing there?

Well, they had been removed from the FBI files by William Sullivan, an assistant to J. Edgar Hoover, in 1971. Sullivan passed them to Assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian for storage in the White House. According to testimony from Mardian, Sullivan was afraid that J. Edgar Hoover "might use" the material to put pressure on the administration in order "to maintain his position as director." But if the wiretaps were legitimate national security

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matters, how could Hoover have used them to put pressure on the administration?

Well, for one thing, there was the identity of the persons subjected to wiretaps and other surveillance. Two White House officials—John Sears and William Safire—had absolutely no responsibility in the national security field. Three White House officials—Morton Halperin, Anthony Lake and Daniel Davidson—were under surveillance for months after they voluntarily resigned from the White House staff.

Two others—Colonel Robert Pursley and State Department Counselor Richard Pedersen—were privy to the secrets of their immediate bosses: Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers. But Laird and Rogers did not know of the taps, and the general assumption is that the White House was basically checking up on the two Cabinet members.

Then there is the tenuous relationship between the leaks and those placed under surveillance. The original wiretaps,

for example, were supposedly generated by a story published in The New York Times by William Beecher on May 19, 1969, about the secret bombing of Cambodia.

The first taps went out on three people on the National Security Council staff—Davidson, Halperin and Helmut Sonnenfeldt—who had no knowledge of the Cambodian bombing. Two others on the NSC staff—Lawrence Eagleburger and Alexander Haig, then a colonel—were not tapped.

Beecher was not originally tapped. Moreover, the whole question of the leak is dubious. The story was originally carried in The London Times as an account from an eye-witness observer. It seems unclear why Americans should not have been privy to the bombing all along.

Finally, there was the manner of the tapping itself. In my own case, there was not even the usual approval for a wiretap by the Attorney General. John Ehrlichman ordered the wiretap, after

discussions with the President. He had it carried out by two men associated in a political capacity with the White House, and with no authority as law enforcement officers. One of the men, John Ragan, was not even a government employee.

Dr. Kissinger seems not to have known about the tap at all—though he was the key figure in all national security matters. I have not been able to find any sensitive national security material in columns I wrote when the tap was applied. Since the President, in the transcript of his February 28, 1973, conversation with John Dean, refers to material which Kissinger was leaking to me, I can only conclude that I was placed under surveillance by Nixon and Ehrlichman as part of an inner White House operation to check up on Kissinger whom I had known for years.

The point of all this is that the so-called national security taps conducted by the Nixon White House had no serious basis in reality. They are not to be compared with the taps conducted through regular channels by past administrations. They represent a tale of stupid and illicit activity generated in the White House by unavowed self-doubts, and they bear on the impeachment inquiry if only because they show how cynically the President and the men around him used the principle of national security as a cover to do whatever they liked.