

Questions That Won't Go Away

By Tom Wicker

Now that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger have left Moscow after a useful but not miraculous summit, questions will be asked again about how much the Secretary of State really knew about White House plumbing and tapping. Maybe a new feat to match his Middle East performance might have overwhelmed these questions for a while but—despite his defenders' cries of outrage—they ought to be asked.

The questions center, first, on the White House wiretaps—unauthorized by any court—on news reporters and some of Mr. Kissinger's associates in the early years of the Nixon Administration; and, second, on the formation of the so-called "plumbers" unit in the White House in 1971. Mr. Kissinger has said under oath to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he did not order the taps, only provided names of those to be tapped, and that he did not know the plumbers existed.

Reporters questioning Mr. Kissinger—in some cases rudely—about these assertions, and implying that he had perjured himself in making them, led the Secretary to threaten his resignation. That set off a wave of indignation, not at Mr. Kissinger but at those who had asked the questions—despite the fact that they were based on F.B.I. memoranda, court affidavits, and other evidences that imputed more knowledge and responsibility to Mr. Kissinger than he had conceded.

Some Kissinger defenders suggested that the press, maddened by Watergate and scenting new blood, was out to bring down everyone in sight. This is a plausible refinement of the Nixon defense line, which holds that the press more or less invented the Watergate crisis to "get Nixon." In fact, the press has not been able to "get"

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anybody except where the evidence—in most cases developed by the special prosecutor or various Congressional committees—was conclusive. It is not clear that even Congress is going to be able to "get Nixon."

It was further suggested that the offenses alleged to Mr. Kissinger were not really serious and consisted of things done all the time, of necessity, by men of serious affairs. Anyway, said the defenders, the Secretary was very nearly the indispensable man in holding world peace and the Nixon Administration together. So he ought not to be harassed, much less hounded from office, even if he is guilty of a few minor transgressions.

Indispensability overstates the case. Mr. Kissinger is a valuable official and a skilled diplomat, particularly in the personal relationships he seems to have established in the Middle East. But this cruel world would get on tolerably well without him, or any one of us, which is a lamentable truth Government officials do not always perceive. And the Nixon Administration will stay afloat, if more or less awash, with or without Mr. Kissinger, as long as Richard Nixon is not convicted of impeachment charges. Besides, the argument that someone is so valuable or important that he must be excused from the ordinary rules has alarming implications in a government of laws. Who can or should make such a judgment? Is that not what the men around Richard Nixon, and perhaps Mr. Nixon himself, were saying of themselves in 1972 and 1973?

Those who think it scandalous to question Mr. Kissinger also insist, however, that even if he knew more about the plumbers and the taps than he has said he did, these are not serious offenses and were necessary, anyway, in his line of work. He had to stop leaks and protect the national security.

Maybe so, but the fact is that there was no legal justification for the employment of the plumbers and only disputed legal authority for the taps. As for failing to tell the truth under oath to a Congressional committee, that is serious enough that Mr. Kissinger's former Cabinet colleague, Richard Kleindienst, has just been given a criminal sentence for it—albeit a light one.

This is not just a matter, moreover, of a few reporters "questioning Kissinger's word." An F.B.I. document says he "initiated" the taps; sworn affidavits by Charles Colson and John Ehrlichman clearly suggest he had more knowledge of the plumbers than he said he did. With that kind of evidence on the record, Mr. Kissinger can hardly claim immunity from further questioning, or blame his troubles on the press alone.