

Joseph Kraft

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Reflections on a Personal Wiretap

People who talk about themselves are boring, so I have been loath to discuss publicly the reports that my phone was tapped by the Nixon administration. The more so as at first I didn't believe the reports.

However, I am impelled to break the silence by the nonsense now being advanced as justification for the wiretaps. My own case gives the lie to any claims that the Nixon administration was only continuing what was done in the past or merely searching for national security leaks.

According to the reports—which I now do believe—my phone was tapped beginning in 1969. The tapping was done on orders of John Ehrlichman, formerly President Nixon's chief aide for domestic affairs. At one point, apparently because no information was coming in, the tap was suspended. The bug was removed by men who entered my home through a second-story window.

The tap was, subsequently renewed. The whole job was done by White House security officials acting without authorization of either a judge or the Attorney General. The FBI never came into the case.

The main justification offered by the administration for the wiretapping is the protection of national security. In that connection there have been claims that, in tapping the phones of journalists and officials, the Nixon administration was only following a precedent. Thus, Henry Kissinger told Newsweek magazine that such wiretaps "were carried on through" previous administrations."

But former Secretary of State Dean Rusk has publicly denied that American officials and journalists were subject to wiretapping in the Kennedy or Johnson administrations. I have checked the record with White House and Defense Department officials who handled national security business under both President Kennedy and President Johnson. They also report that there was no such bugging. Moreover, my strong impression is that Dr. Kissinger has traced the record through some of the same former officials. I think he now has information that could cast grave doubt on what he told Newsweek. It would at least be interesting to have him clear the record.

To underpin the claim that national security justified the taps, administration officials, including President Nixon himself, have stressed the need to prevent leaks. More specifically they have cited improper disclosure of information concerning several well-known events.

There was the administration approach to the Mideast which was approved by the National Security Council early in 1969. There was the shooting down, by North Korea, of an American intelligence plane in 1969. There was also that year the secret American bombing of Cambodia.

In 1971 there was the leaking of the Pentagon Papers. Also in 1971 there was the leak of a fallback position the United States had blocked out for the SALT negotiations.

It is hard, almost impossible, to believe that concern over those leaks

could have been operative in my case. I had absolutely nothing to do with the leaks which occurred in 1969, when the first taps were placed on my telephone. Of the 1971 leaks, I had absolutely nothing to do with the one concerning the American position in the arms control talks.

I had known Daniel Ellsberg before the leaking of the Pentagon Papers. But I played absolutely no part in the passing of those documents. Indeed, I publicly condemned the act in such harsh terms that my private communication with Ellsberg was broken off.

Even assuming I had had something to do with the leaks, the administration went about the wiretapping in a very funny way. For the regular procedure with national security involved is to have an order signed by the Attorney General for action by the FBI. But the FBI assured me that that was never done in my case.

Why not? Well, my overwhelming impression is that national security wasn't even dimly involved. I think at the root of the matter is the credulous suspicion maintained by the President and his closest associates toward the press, the government bureaucracy and the academic community. In particular, they didn't trust Dr. Kissinger when he first came aboard.

The tapping was done as a check on his loyalty. In effect the highest officials of the land sanctioned house-breaking and other illegal activities so they could hear what they fancied Dr. Kissinger might be saying behind Mr. Nixon's back. It is a sad, sad story.

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