

I Bug You, I Bug

By Mary McGrory
Washington Star

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THE WATERGATE committee sprang its first surprise witness, and he had a big surprise — the President is bugging himself.

Alexander Butterfield, a former presidential aide with a cleft chin, a glowing tan and a dark blue suit, wasn't sure he should be telling White House secrets. But he had assumed that his superiors, when questioned by the committee staff, had already spilled the beans.

The question naturally arises as to why the President was putting himself under electronic surveillance. Butterfield had been told it was for "history." He noted that the President seemed "oblivious" of and "uninhibited" by the recording devices all around him.

It is entirely possible that just as the President knew nothing about Watergate, he had no idea the White House was crawling with bugs. Butterfield said his orders to install the gadgets came from Harry Higby, who took his orders from H. R. Haldeman.

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WE KNOW, of course, that the President had nothing against wire-tapping other people. The Huston memo of 1970, which he approved, pro-

posed listening in on practically everybody. It could be that the President was trying to set an example to the nation by showing — if it all ever came out — that it is quite harmless and painless to have an open line at all times.

But considering the solitary and secretive nature of this President, the "fruits," as they are called, of electronic surveillance, might not have yielded a rich harvest for future scholars.

What difference does it make to have a recording switch under the Cabinet room table when there are never any Cabinet meetings? Former Interior Secretary Wally Hickel had to get in touch with the President by leaking a letter. The only time he got into the Oval Office was to get fired.

As for the bugged Oval Office telephone, what would posterity get out of that? The President hardly ever used it. He did to be sure, once call up the moon, and he has been known to get on the wire with victorious football coaches, but these are all on the record, anyway.

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THE GRIM REAPER of would-be callers and visitors was his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman. Could it be that he had the President tapped and taped? Bugging is not considered a hostile act at the White House. When it was revealed that members of Henry Kissinger's staff were being bugged, it was explained that it was done for their own protection, to prove their innocence.

Haldeman may have wished to extend that courtesy to his chief. Although nobody outside ever suspected that the President was receiving heads of antiwar groups through the side or calling up Angela Davis on the sly, the thought may have crossed Haldeman's suspicious mind.

Maybe Haldeman worried that Ehrlichman, the only other person the President ever saw, would tell him something about Watergate that the President should not know.

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IF THE PRESIDENT ever comments on the bugs, he could say as he has said often of Watergate that "everybody's doing it." Certainly they were at the White House, as the hearing record attests. Bugging of the executive mansion and Camp David could be dismissed as of "no great significance," which is John Mitchell's phrase for the Watergate break-in.

History may still be served. That is, if the President breaks out the tapes before the Nixon Library is built, and assuming they have survived the burning or shredding that has befallen so much other Watergate prose.

James Reston is on vacation

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