

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, July 24—When recently released F.B.I. documents showed Gen. Alexander ("Only You") Haig to be the man who requested the wiretap on my telephone in 1969, I called the President's chief aide in California to wonder why he had chosen me.

It hadn't been his idea, he explained—he had only been an agent carrying out somebody's orders. What's more, the tap was my own fault—I never should have taken that call from a British correspondent whose phone was being tapped.

As we spoke, a voice with a Senior Official's accent kept badgering him in the background. "Tell him it wasn't me, make sure he knows it wasn't me." General Haig gladly made that point, that Henry Kissinger had never known about the wiretap on the White House speechwriter the House Judiciary Committee calls "F."

When I asked him to put Henry on the phone, the Secretary of State took time from settling the Greek-Turkish war to assure an old colleague that he had been totally unaware of this wiretap which had his office's fingerprints all over it.

A few days later, Secretary Kissinger repeated that denial under oath to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is pursuing him with the identical say-it-isn't-so lethargy that Mr. Nixon showed to Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman in March of last year. Obviously, General Haig intends to support that denial of Kissinger complicity when he testifies next week. The plan seems to be to blacken the name of J. Edgar Hoover, which cannot please his old friend in the Oval Office, but these are hardly times to be finicky about dead men's reputations.

Al Haig, a good man in a pinch, was the gift to the Nixon Administration of President Johnson's aide, Joe Califano, with whom he whizkidded under Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. Ironically, nobody has been more barbed in criticism of wiretapping than Mr. Califano; nobody was more deeply enmeshed in wiretapping than General Haig.

As a service, then, a good soldier who is possibly being asked to take the rap for somebody else, and whose superb discipline and patriotic fervor kept him from expressing any misgivings about wiretaps when they were illegally installed, let me help you, Al, prepare for the kind of question that might come up when you appear before the committee.

Did you ever have a recording capability in your office? Were your telephone calls all monitored by a secretary on a "dead key," who then transcribed the verbatim notes, un-

knownst to your callers? Was this true of Henry Kissinger as well when you served as his deputy?

Where are these transcripts kept today? Is there anything on any of them, yours or Mr. Kissinger's, referring to the installation of, or the fruits of, the seventeen wiretaps? Specifically, do you have transcripts of calls to William Sullivan or Bernard Wells or Robert Haynes of the F.B.I.? Are there records of the conversations Mr. Kissinger had with Mr. Hoover about the wiretaps?

Forewarned is forearmed; with advance knowledge of these questions, Al, you will be able to frame answers that will turneth away wrath without turning on your present or former boss. Here are some more:

Did you know of the existence of the tap on "F" when it was put on? Did you conceal this knowledge from the President's national security adviser, Dr. Kissinger? Why? Did anybody tell you not to tell your immediate superior about this? Who told you to tell the F.B.I. that it was okay to install the tap?

Can you think of another instance in which you were asked to do anything by a high authority without informing the man who was nominally your boss? Did the President deal with you on other matters behind Mr. Kissinger's back? From whom other than the President or Mr. Kissinger would you have taken an order in 1969-70?

If you are determined to substantiate the Kissinger-never-knew story, Al, even though it makes it seem you were in cahoots with somebody to keep Henry in the dark, then watch out for Robert Mardian, the former Assistant Attorney General.

Mr. Mardian told the F.B.I. in excruciating detail how he delivered the satchel full of wiretap summaries to the White House in 1971, and how you and he and Henry Kissinger carefully checked off every single one of the 1969 taps.

That vivid picture of the three of you going over the itemized list of taps is going to be hard to handle, but there should be time between now and testimony time to come up with something plausible. Besides, Mr. Mardian has been indicted as a co-conspirator and has no friends on the Foreign Relations Committee.

Nobody likes to learn that he has been systematically spied on by his colleagues, using a flagrantly illegal national-security cover for snooping into political loyalty. By preparing you for these questions, Al, I hope to have shown that "F" harbors no hard feelings. As you pointed out, the eve of impeachment is no time to bear a grudge.