

A Super-Secret Air

News-Leak Wiretaps Described

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Wiretaps on government officials and newsmen ordered by the Nixon administration following alleged news leaks were carried out in an atmosphere of secrecy far more stringent than any other FBI national security wiretaps in the last 20 years, according to court papers filed here.

In addition to detailing the conditions of the wiretapping, the deposition filed in federal court offers a rare glimpse into the FBI's top security wiretap-monitoring installation in the old Post Office building.

There, according to the deposition, scores of "investigative clerks" sit before modified switchboards at library-style tables, headphones clamped over their ears, reference books by their sides to help identify names, waiting to listen in on conversations picked up on what some consider the nation's most sensitive domestic wiretaps.

The deposition comes from Ernest H. Belter, a former FBI employee who from 1961 to 1973 personally installed nearly 90 per cent of all national security wiretaps here and supervised their monitoring. Belter's deposition was taken by attorneys in a lawsuit by Morton Halperin, the former National Security Council aide who was one of 17 government officials and newsmen whose telephones were tapped by the Nixon administration.

Halperin contends the wiretaps were illegal because they were not court-approved and may have been politically motivated. The government says the taps were legal because the President has the authority to order national security wiretaps without court approval and were a legitimate national security effort to stop leaks of classified information.

FBI employees monitoring the government officials and newsmen taps were told to keep no records of their activities concerning the taps

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and not to discuss their assignments even with other FBI employees within the monitoring post.

In general, monitoring clerks are told to listen for all possible information about known and suspected spies, including their sex habits and possible drug usage, Belter said.

But in the taps of government officials and newsmen, Belter said, the monitor was given a "broad area in which (the subject) was interested, so that he would (include in the logs) conversation that had to do with almost all of the day-to-day concerns of the U.S. government."

Attorneys familiar with this and other litigation growing out of the Nixon-ordered wiretaps said the deposition by Belter is the most devastating testimony yet by a government official that the taps were not normal national security wiretaps.

Belter began his deposition by describing the normal procedures for the installation of a national security wiretap. He told how he would make arrangements through former telephone company official Horace Hampton on behalf of the FBI to get a specific telephone line connected to a trunk cable running to the old Post Office building.

There, he would make the actual installation of the tap and plug in tape recorders to the lines. He would then check to make sure he was on the correct line by dialing the number under surveillance; if it was busy, he knew the tap was completed.

After the connection is complete, the work of the monitoring agents begins. They sit at a library-style desk with at least two tape recorders at their command in front of a telephone-type switchboard, he said.

The switchboard is equipped with a light and buzzer to show there is activity on a given tapped line. When the light goes on and the buzzer sounds, the clerks begin simultaneously listening and taking notes on the conversation while also recording it.

If the conversation is considered important, it is typed verbatim soon after it is completed. If it requires urgent action, it is immediately routed to an FBI supervisor, Belter said.

"If, for instance, there was a known NKVD agent (the Soviet equivalent of the CIA) who had made arrangements to meet an individual that we considered of some interest to us at 2 o'clock that afternoon, that information would be of no value to use tomorrow morning," Belter said.

There were few operational manuals telling the clerks how to do their jobs, Belter added, since "the whole activity of electronic surveillance has sort of been kept in a closet all the years when I was with it."

Belter said the sophisticated equipment used makes national security taps almost impossible to detect, and if a customer whose line was tapped reported trouble on the line, the telephone company would immediately tell the FBI to remove the tap so it would not be discovered on any line check.

He noted, however, that Metro construction interfered with wiretapping operations because of cut cables. "The whole phone company was driven crazy by all of these changes and these was plenty of opportunity for things to go wrong," he added.

After a tap has been on a phone for a while, the monitors may elect to listen only to calls they know they are interested in, Belter said. But when the taps are first installed, the monitors try to "compile sort of a book on that subject," including the identities of his friends, the friends of his wife, and the friends of his children; his whereabouts at given times of the day, and "even if he calls for the weather."

The subject's sex habits are also fair game, Belter said. "If you have a known or suspected Soviet intelligence agent, sure, we want to know if he gets along with his wife or if he doesn't. We particularly want to know if he had some extramarital affair going," he said.

After giving the general description of the activities of the national security unit, Belter then gave his recollection of the beginning of the Halperin tap:

"On May 9 (1969), (FBI security coordination supervisor Courtland J. Jones came to me with a peice of

scratch pad paper in his hand and said words to the effect of 'I just got a call from Bill Sullivan (former Associate FBI Director William Sullivan) and he got a call from the White House and he wants us to put on this coverage right away.'

"I think in response to a question from me . . . he (Jones) said this was a leak case out of the White House. I seem to recall his mentioning that these are (then NSC aide Henry) Kissinger's men, and I think there was also a few remarks about 'They're really upset about the leaking of information out of the White House.'"

Belter said he had never before or since received an order from the White House "with the directness that occurred in this case," and "I considered that this was as important a matter as we had handled in my many years."

Belter said Jones told him further that the taps were to be handled "strictly on a need-to-know basis; that I was to assign only old and trusted employees to it; that we were to keep the knowledge of the thing limited to an absolute minimum; that we were to receive no paper on this installation; that we were to generate no paper on the installation; that we were to keep no copies of the log summaries; that we were to do no indexing; that the log summaries should be hand-carried to Mr. Sullivan's office the first in the morning of each regular work day."

Belter said he and Jones were concerned over the lack of paperwork on the taps because "at the time Mr. Sullivan was feuding with Mr. (former FBI director J. Edgar) Hoover . . . and this thing was such an important thing to us, the fact that we were covering White House people, and people still in the White House, that it made us a little bit nervous."

"And I think we mentioned something like, God, I hope Sullivan isn't free-wheeling and dealing direct with the White House and cutting out the regular routine . . . In other words, that he was undertaking action between him and someone at the White House," Belter added.

The actual written authorization for the operation came three days later from then Attorney General John N. Mitchell, Belter said. The tapped lines were monitored on a 24-hour daily basis by three shifts of employees, he said.

As the taps remained on, Belter said, he and Jones questioned the type and amount of information being received on the lines but that Jones told him the taps would have to remain until

orders came from Sullivan or others to remove them.

In routine cases, there is a review 30 days after a national security wiretap is installed to determine if it is

still needed, and the taps then have to be rejustified every 90 days, Belter said. No such reviews or rejustifications were ever made in the Halperin tap, Belter said.