

A Pattern Long Developing

By Tom Wicker

During the long Watergate ordeal, Richard Nixon and some of the men around him frequently insisted that whatever they might have done that was questionable was no worse than what other Presidents and Administrations had done in the past. That is not much of a defense, even if it could be demonstrated as fact; but substantial new charges do suggest that President Lyndon Johnson used and profited from illicit wiretaps in the campaign year 1964.

These are reported to have been aimed at activities within his own party, particularly those of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the former Attorney General, who was considered a rival for party leadership

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in the summer of 1964. The Washington Post, quoting an interrogation of a former F.B.I. agent by the Senate Watergate Committee, said that Mr. Johnson kept tabs on what was happening at the Democratic National Convention at Atlantic City through wiretaps and bugs planted in the hotel rooms of Dr. King and in a storefront civil rights headquarters.

Civil rights was a major issue of the time, and the seating of a Mississippi black delegation was the major convention controversy. Mr. Kennedy had strong black support, so this disreputable eavesdropping could have given Mr. Johnson a variety of information helping him to control the convention. The agent's interview with the Watergate committee has never been released since that committee was not empowered to look into the 1964 election; but Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee, a member of the committee, has confirmed The Post's account of it.

That account, moreover, lends credence to Senator Barry Goldwater's belief that, as Mr. Johnson's Republican opponent, he was wiretapped in 1964; and to Mr. Nixon's charge that when he was running against Hubert Humphrey in 1968, Mr. Johnson—still in the White House—eavesdropped on the Republican candidates. And it is particularly ironic that the 1964 tapping is said to have involved both Dr. King and Robert Kennedy—since the latter, as Attorney General, had ordered an earlier tap on Dr. King because of charges that a Soviet-connected Communist was in the civil rights leader's entourage.

Reports of these reprehensible activities are not much of a surprise to those who have contended all along that Watergate was not the isolated act of a few unprincipled or "overzealous" men; that it was, instead, part of a long-developing pattern of surveillance, deception, interference and illegal activities by a virtually unchecked Executive operating in secrecy; and that what was done in the name of "national security" all too often had been ordered for self-serving political reasons.

The Atlantic City episode, if confirmed, was precisely in that pattern. Needing party unity and political information—Mr. Johnson was at that time virtually paranoid about the threat to him he thought Robert Kennedy represented—the President is said to have ordered the F.B.I. to conduct illicit surveillances and wiretapping. The cover story then was devised that this was necessary to prevent possible violence, disruption and other threats to the convention and the nation.

(This was well before the urban riots, the college demonstrations, the peace marches and the other protests and disturbances of the later sixties. Those who attended the uncontested Atlantic City convention will recall it as one of the duller ever held by either party.)

The reports of the Atlantic City matter are particularly timely, since the new Senate special committee to investigate the so-called "intelligence community" is empowered to probe the F.B.I. as well as the Central Intelligence Agency. The beginning of some illegal domestic operations by the C.I.A. also has been charged to Mr. Johnson in some reports, so the committee clearly has an investigative responsibility that cuts across party lines, and one that can hardly be seen as merely another Democratic effort to "get" Mr. Nixon.

The alleged abuses of the Johnson Administration, as well as the demonstrated abuses of Watergate, also make the tacit point that the committee has no reason to spare the Truman, Eisenhower or Kennedy Administrations in its belated effort to find out what's been going on under cover. In the Cold War and national security hysteria that has distorted American life since World War II, it is reasonable to suppose that plenty might have been going on in all Administrations of both parties. There will never be a better time or a more sympathetic public attitude for finding out the truth, fixing responsibility for abuses, and fashioning safeguards to protect American citizens against their own Government.

But "reforming" or "reorganizing" or "overseeing" existing agencies like the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. may be incomplete answers to the deeper questions at the heart of the Senate committee's inquiry. Can a free society tolerate powerful secret police forces whose primary concern is "national security" rather than the rule of law? If so, should any President be able to command them directly?