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OBSERVER

Ever since publication of the Pentagon papers, Government people have been complaining about the press invading the Government's privacy. "Unthinkable," said an F.B.I. man. "Unthinkable to have a situation where people cannot even write memos in the privacy of Government offices without some newspaper getting hold of the material."

And so saying, he bent his head to the delicate task, at which the interviewer had interrupted him, of installing a telephone wiretap.

"Privacy," said the Internal Revenue Service agent, pausing in his work to glance up from his desk, "is absolutely essential to the working of good government."

The citizen with whom he had been talking cleared his throat. The agent looked at him with annoyance. "Quit stalling," he said. "We want to know exactly how much money you earned last year and how you earned it. And remember, we have ways of making you talk."

The agent scanned some papers which the man had given him. "What's this?" he demanded. "You can't have this \$15 deduction for entertaining unless you tell us who you entertained, when you entertained them, and what you talked about during the entertainment."

Over at the local draft board, the Government's representatives were so busy inquiring into a young man's religious creed, in order to decide whether he deserved to be shipped to Asia for cannon fodder, that they could not pause for an interview, although they did send out word that the public obviously had no right to know the private conversations of Government officials who were responsible for keeping popular athletes from being drafted.

"Of course, privacy is essential to our work," explained an official of the Census Bureau. "The reason should be obvious." He turned back to the 1980 census form, which he was preparing. "Listen," he said, changing the subject, "don't you think it would be interesting to make everybody in America all tell me next time how many bottles of whisky they have in the house at the time I interview them?"

At the office where the Army was dismantling its program of civilian surveillance, the officer refused to be interviewed. "Our files show that we had a file on you before we began dismantling our program," he said by way of explanation, "and we don't talk to anybody we've had a file on."

"But don't feel bad about it," his

deputy quickly added. "Our files show we had a file on everybody."

"It would be insupportable to have the public privy to confidential Government communications which, if published, might show that the Government has not been completely honorable at all times," explained a postal worker who was busy slitting open letters to inspect for marijuana, re-sealing them and stamping them "Damaged in Handling."

Down the street, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, a clerk was asking an applicant for a driver's license, if he was diabetic, subject to fainting spells, senile, imbecilic or alcoholic. "The Government has a right to privacy, just like Bethlehem Steel," said the clerk.

At the State Department, not surprisingly, there was almost total opposition to anybody's knowing anything. "Just imagine," said a State Department man who did not want anyone to know his name, "what a difficult time Professor Kissinger would have running a foreign policy if people kept calling up and prying."

At State, he said, nobody violates the professor's privacy by trying to find out what foreign policy he has made lately. Professor Kissinger, a civilized man, reciprocates by never calling up the State Department and inquiring if anyone is in.

At the Justice Department, Attorney General Mitchell declined to be interviewed, although his attempt to preserve governmental privacy in the case of the Pentagon papers suggests where he stands on the matter. An assistant explained that Mr. Mitchell was totally absorbed composing a plea to Congress for authority to jail everybody who does not have an airtight alibi for his whereabouts over the past 25 years.

It was impossible to get a highly authoritative spokesman at the Pentagon. "Who are you?" asked a man at the door who looked as if he hated nothing so much as the thought of having the Government's privacy violated. "Who do you want to see? What do you want? Why don't you have an appointment? Are you now or have you ever been a member? Why or why not, as the case may be? Have you been vaccinated in the past three years? How long have you been married? Do you know where your children are at this time? Fill out this form, not failing to include 25 of your leading computer identification numbers. Strip to the knees, open your mouth, and say, 'Ah.'"