

James Reston Reports:

Government by Outrage**Washington**

PERSONALITIES keep dominating the news here in the blazing heat of Washington. What's going on between President Nixon and Vice President Agnew? How are they going to deal with one another and with these independent characters like Judge Sirica, Attorney General Elliot Richardson, and Senator Sam Ervin, who keep asking awkward questions.

Washington loves things like this: Is Nixon mad at Agnew or is Agnew sore at Nixon? And if the President wasn't worried about what the Vice President was about to say or do, why would he hurry back from San Clemente at Agnew's request?

Well, it is all very intriguing and it takes your mind off the heat momentarily, but it also takes Washington's mind off the things that have to be done about correcting the corruption which is at the base of all these troubles.

Two specific problems, among many others, are ready for action around here, and they may be more important in the long run than what happens to the personalities and the popularity polls.

These are the problems of controlling the practice of spying on personal privacy, which got the President into so much trouble, and the practice of misusing vast government contracts for political and private gain, which is the basis of the criminal investigation of Vice President Agnew.

THE WATERGATE scandals tell us almost more about the improper invasion of personal privacy in America than most people seem to want to know, but they don't tell us about the things we don't know about this growing system of surreptitious surveillance.

Sen. Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin has been howling in protest about this ever since 1967. He has been pointing out that at least 50 different federal agencies, with more than 20,000 investigators, have been operating in the United States, often on legitimate missions, but often not, and always without effective congressional supervision or control.

These include agents, not only from the FBI or the CIA, or the military intelligence services, but from the Post Office, the Narcotics Bureau of the Treasury, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Internal Revenue Service, the Food and Drug Administration, the State Department and the Civil Service Commission, among many others.

Also, this at a time when new inventions in the field of electronic surveillance make it much easier to monitor telephones, or even overhear private conversations in private dwellings.

What has happened here over the last postwar generations is that the scientific capacity to use the arts of wartime espionage on private citizens has greatly expanded while the political capacity to control all this has actually declined.

In much the same way, the federal government's power to grant lucrative contracts for highways, government buildings and services, to pick builders, choose consultants, rent office space, finance public housing, university housing, etc., has greatly expanded — precisely at a time when the cost of political campaigning has gone through the roof. The temptations of all this are perfectly obvious.

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FORTUNATELY, sometimes our main hope in Washington is that these outrages will enable the government to do sensible things. There is a danger, however, that the personal problems of the President and the Vice President now may divert the Congress from the legislation which is already in committee, and as a result of recent scandals, could now be passed.

"The natural progress of things," Thomas Jefferson wrote 185 years ago, "is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground." And Mr. Justice Felix Frankfurter observed 30 years ago that "the history of liberty has largely been the history of procedural safeguards."

Well, liberty has been yielding, government has been gaining and the "procedural standards" have been breaking down, but with a little more public outrage on these fundamental issues, it is just possible now that something could be done.

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