

President Authorized 17 Wiretaps

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President Nixon personally authorized the use of 17 wiretaps on officials and newsmen between 1969 and 1971 although the practice was reportedly spurned by the Kennedy-Johnson administrations as too "damaging" to use.

The dispute over the secret monitoring of telephone calls by the Nixon administration rebounded yesterday as the White House acknowledged President Nixon's role in the wiretapping.

A White House spokesman said that President Nixon "authorized the wiretap procedure to solve a national security problem," namely, security breaches through news leaks. From among those whose telephones were tapped, however, came the charge that the administration used wiretaps to test "political loyalty" or "to find excuses to fire people" who disagreed with the President.

The political charge has been hovering over the wiretap controversy since Acting FBI Director William D. Ruckelshaus on Monday disclosed that the telephones of 13 government officials and four newsmen were tapped between May, 1969 and Feb. 1971 on White House orders.

All or most of the officials whose telephones were tapped reportedly worked on the National Security Council staff directed by presidential security adviser Henry A. Kissinger. Many former members of Kissinger's staff suspect or claim that the unadmitted ulterior motive for the wiretapping was that their political liberalism made them the "enemy" in the eyes of such top presidential assistants as John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman.

There was indeed a mixture of security and political

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suspicious in the White House about many of the original members of Kissinger's staff, authoritative sources inside the administration privately agree. The original NSC staff group holding the most important and sensitive posts was made up predominantly of holdovers from the Kennedy-Johnson administrations.

Administration officials so far have not addressed the political question, maintaining that security alone was their motivation.

Kissinger on Monday said he had discussed the security problem with the late J. Edgar Hoover, but denied that he had "initiated" any particular surveillance process on his employees or on newsmen, or that he had asked "that any particular individual be investigated."

Three FBI sources told The Washington Post in the last two days, however, that specific wiretaps on individuals were authorized by Kissinger and by Haldeman, either by letter or telephone to Hoover.

Kissinger's original reaction to that claim was reported to be that Haldeman may have initiated requests for wiretaps on specific individuals, and it was possible that Kissinger did, but he could not recall. Subsequently, Kissinger said it is "almost inconceivable" that he named persons as subjects for wiretapping. On occasion, it was said, Kissinger or Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., his deputy, supplied to the FBI names of staff members who had access to sensitive documents, and the procedure from then on was up to the FBI.

Kissinger is greatly alarmed about the danger that this security process, which he regarded as legal, necessary and defensible, will be telescoped publicly into the Watergate scandal of criminal deeds. Other administration officials said they share this concern about public confusion between what they regard as two totally unrelated events.

The Nixon administration has described the wiretapping practices it employed as legal at the time. The federal courts since 1971 have specified that electronic

surveillance in domestic cases requires a court warrant, and not merely Executive Branch authorization.

In addition, there has been a long-standing impression that wiretapping inside the government long had been an accepted and relatively standard practice. That was firmly disputed yesterday in telephone interviews with two ranking officials of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations.

Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk said he spurned such practices as both ineffective and more damaging than beneficial to the total national interest. Said Rusk:

"The only way to really run down leaks is to put real surveillance—not only wiretaps—of all sorts on officers of the department and/or on the press. I just couldn't do it. The occasional leaks were much less damaging than using that kind of technique."

Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, who served as assistant attorney general in the Kennedy administration, and as attorney general and under secretary of state in the Johnson administrations, said yesterday of the period between 1964 and 1969:

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, no

wiretaps were made with respect to employees of the government or with respect to newsmen while I was in Justice. When I was attorney general, I did review all of the taps authorized by Robert Kennedy when he was attorney general. The same is true when I was in the Department of State—such taps were never requested."

The names of four members of the NSC staff whose phones were wiretapped have been publicly disclosed so far. One of them, still at work, defended the practice; three former employees condemned and deplored it.