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Editorials

New Mysteries On Top Secrecy

IN PRESIDENT NIXON'S latest Watergate statement, the American public is initiated into new mysteries of its government. What is new has not so much to do with the Watergate affair as with the security operations of the preceding years of 1969, 1970 and 1971. The story, although only fragmentarily revealed by the President, unfolds a picture of a modern government caught up in the modern obsession with secrecy. It happens to have been a Republican government, it could have been a Democratic; it was ours, it could have been some other country's.

Long before the Watergate break-in," Mr. Nixon's statement said, "three important national security operations took place which have subsequently become entangled in the Watergate case." These were:

IN 1969, "leaks of secret information" about highly sensitive initiatives aimed at ending the Vietnam war, settling the Middle East and limiting nuclear arms occurred. Newspaper reporters who got the leaks were wiretapped, as is now publicly known, though the President did not acknowledge it; so were some State Department and Kissinger office people—all to "curtail further leaks."

By way of a footnote, it may be observed that all the wiretappers in Washington are not going to succeed in stopping such leaks. In the 1971 Pentagon Papers injunction hearing, it was widely and freely testified that leaks are a way of life in government, beyond the power of higher-ups to prevent—unless they were able to deploy an organization with the intimidating powers of a Soviet KGB.

WHICH IS APPARENTLY just about what the government's top security people next set out to do. By 1970 the domestic security problem had reached "critical proportions" in the cities and on the campuses, with rioting, violence, arson, bomb threats and "gun battles between guerrilla-style groups." In devising an intelligence plan to cope with all this, the "urgent need" was discussed for expanding and better coordinating intelligence operations. One aspect of this, Mr. Nixon said, was to include authorization for breaking and entering "in specified situations related to national security."

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover knocked the plan on the head—why is not explained—and it was withdrawn. Hoover thereafter neutralized the development of a combined domestic-foreign intelligence operation by cutting off relations with all government intelligence agencies except the White House—happily, in our view.

THE 1971 CREATION of those obsessed with secrecy was the "plumbers," the group headed by Egil Krogh, John Ehrlichman's assistant. Under the President's "first priority" directive, but without his authorization to use any illegal means, this overkill unit burgled Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and thereby lost the government's case against the distributor of the Pentagon Papers.

Throughout these revelations, one is struck by the readiness of public officials to worship secrecy as though it were a god and as though any breach or leak was a profane act justifying any means for preventing or discovering or punishing it. Most secrecy in government is probably not worth the effort of keeping it. The trouble is, to keep it calls for wiretaps and burglary, for lying and espionage, then counterespionage and coverup, and finally it ends in the total corruption of the whole apparatus, as we see in Watergate.