

Nixon's Secrecy Rationale: Isolate Policy Foes on Right

Source of Leaks

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The Nixon administration's claim that "extraordinary actions" were justified to plug "unprecedented" leaks of abnormally sensitive foreign policy initiatives raises a basic question: Who was leaking what?

President Nixon publicly has pointed an accusing finger primarily at the left wing of the American political spectrum. In his statement Tuesday, Mr. Nixon cited disclosure of the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg, and demonstrations and rioting over his 1970 decision to send U.S. troops into Cambodia, as outstanding examples of "grave" threats to national security.

The specific news leaks that are cited by Nixon administration officials in the 1969-71 period as the cause of greatest concern for their ongoing foreign policy, as contrasted to past decisions, however, point the bulk of suspicion toward the opposite side of the political spectrum—the right wing.

Several former members of the Na-

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tional Security Council staff assert "that most serious news leaks came from the right—from the Pentagon."

The uproar over illegal security practices used during the Nixon administration, these sources state, obscures the fact that the administration was trying to isolate from its secrets not only politically suspect officials carried over from the Kennedy-Johnson administration, but also the right wing of the Republican Party.

Republican "hawks" were by far the more formidable and natural adversaries of the boldest foreign policy initiatives taken by the Nixon administration, these sources point out: President Nixon's turnabout on China, his expansion of ties with the Soviet Union, and most notably, nuclear arms accords with Moscow.

Suspicion about the opposing political wings, right and left, appears to have reinforced the Nixon administration's determination to wall itself off from the federal bureaucracy to a greater extent than any administration in modern times, in order to conduct what presidential national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger has labeled "leapfrog diplomacy."

The fact that Kissinger's own National Security Council staff was itself suspect at the outset for being tilted too far to the intellectual left, illustrates the cross-currents of suspicion that swept through the White House.

Kissinger's staff, in effect, was purged with his compliance, at least in part through the use of wiretapping, conducted by the FBI.

President Nixon's statement on Tuesday suggests that the refusal of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to accept an administration plan to expand domestic intelligence operations—including "breaking and entering"—contributed to a White House decision to take the next step. This was the introduction of the White House's own super secret security operation, the "Plumbers," with agents who soon stepped over the margin between legality and illegality to burglary and forgery.

As Communists would describe such a structure—which they were among the first to perfect—the White House had developed its own parallel security "apparat." Administration officials are understandably deeply resentful about any such comparison with Communist practice.

In retrospect, it is possible to piece together from the existing record some of the factors that set the Nixon administration on its course of obsession with abnormal security in the name of national security.

President Nixon came into office with built-in suspicion of the foreign policy establishment left over from the Kennedy-Johnson administrations. His own share in the McCarthy era, which he preceded by spearheading the Communist charges against State Department official Alger Hiss, had left

indelible marks on the subsequently decimated State Department during his 1968 presidential campaign, Mr. Nixon pledged to "sweep clean" the department.

Actually he did not launch the expected purge of the department, from which all the old targets long were gone anyhow. Instead, President Nixon virtually cut off the State Department, as an organization, from access to the highest secrets. When the President first outlined to newsmen what became the Nixon Doctrine, the department as an institution had less information about his intentions than reporters.

Kissinger, for different reasons, also separated himself from the bureaucracy. For years before entering the White House Kissinger had written that "creative diplomacy" required independence of the caution and immobility of bureaucracies.

He maintained that "the basic motivation of a bureaucracy is its quest for safety." A bureaucracy, Kissinger said, "tends to exaggerate the technical complexities of its problems" and seeks "to reduce questions of judgment to a minimum."

As a result, very early in the Nixon administration there was a consensus, for mixed reasons, about the dangers of bureaucracy and the acute risk of "leaks" from it. The primary concern of Nixon confidants H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman is said to have been the loyalty of the bureaucracy to the President. Kissinger's primary concern was leaks that upset his diplomatic strategy. President Nixon shared both apprehensions.

The President has now specified that by mid-1969, he had at stake "a number of highly sensitive foreign policy initiatives. They were aimed at ending the war in Vietnam, achieving a settlement in the Middle East, limiting nuclear arms, and establishing new relationships among the great powers. These involved highly secret diplomacy. They were closely interrelated."

To this assessment, President Nixon added an extraordinary point: "Leaks of secret information about any one (of the initiatives) could endanger all." This is the most sweeping claim of foreign policy linkage that the Nixon administration has ever made. On that basis, a single security leak could endanger the entire structure of administration foreign policy. No administration ever contended that its objectives were so precarious.

President Nixon said that is "exactly what happened"; news accounts "appeared in 1969... obviously based on leaks—some of them extensive and detailed—by people having access to the most highly classified security materials."

"There was no way to carry forward these diplomatic initiatives unless further leaks could be prevented. This required finding the source of the leaks."

Was the President indulging in retrospective hyperbole last week, to justify the

security excesses that came afterward, or was he accurately recalling his state of mind at the time?

President Johnson had his own brand of explosive sensitivity about certain kinds of news leaks, especially those that forecast his personal actions: what appointment he would make, what speech he would deliver, even what hour he would depart for his Texas ranch.

The Johnson administration never did succeed completely in choking off such leaks. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk has said that "the occasional leaks were much less damaging" than the massive "surveillance required to prevent them. Recent claims by former Kennedy-Johnson administration officials however, than they avoided all wiretapping of employees have been sharply challenged by others, who report there was extensive wiretapping in some departments, notably Defense.

The Nixon administration has been phlegmatic about many of the personalized kinds of news leaks that incensed President Johnson. But it has been very "rough-handed," as one insider described it, about anything it construed as a "national security leak," using an exceptionally sweeping definition of domestic and diplomatic criteria as its explosion point.

What the record now indicates is that the Nixon administration, early in its first term, decided to use shock tactics on the federal bureaucracy to stun it into political-security loyalty.

White House officials have stated that the most serious initial news leak of the group of disclosures in mid-

1969 that precipitated the wiretapping of 13 officials, mostly in the White House, plus four newsmen, was May, 9, 1969, report on American B-52 bombing in Cambodia.

The news article was written by William Beecher, Pentagon reporter for The New York Times. Beecher, by coincidence, or industriousness, was also the author of what was rated as the single most damaging news leak about the American-Soviet nuclear arms talks, published on July 23, 1971, in The New York Times.

His Cambodian article reported that Cambodian authorities not only had avoided any protest over the American bombing of Communist units, but were increasingly "cooperating with American and South Vietnamese military men at the border, often giving them information on Vietcong and North Vietnamese movements into South Vietnam."

While The New York Times was a firm critic of U.S. policy in Indochina, the Beecher article contained military justifications for the decision to bomb in Cambodia, not attacks on the order. The story said the bombing represented a desire "to signal Hanoi that the Nixon administration, while pressing for peace in Paris, is willing to take some military risks avoided by the previous administration."

The account, of course, also disclosed an unannounced expansion of American military activity, unknown to the public, but evidently known to the Communist forces on the receiving end of the bombing.

President Nixon has said that the wiretap surveillance that followed this outbreak of news leaks "produced important leads that made it possible to tighten the security of highly sensitive materials."

No claim was made that anyone was fired as a result of these leaks. FBI Acting Director William D. Ruckelshaus, in first disclosing that group of 17 wiretaps on May 14, was asked if they resulted in officials being "punished in any way."

"Not that I know of," Ruckelshaus replied. He said the wiretaps provided "considerable evidence" that "some of the people in very sensitive positions were giving vent to their opinions rather regularly and rather openly..."

Other administration sources have said that the wiretaps helped to eliminate "blabbermouths," with at least three White House and Pentagon officials eased out of their jobs.

On June 13, 1971, The New York Times began publication of the Pentagon Papers, which President Nixon said provided "every reason to believe this was a security leak of unprecedented proportions," which "posed a threat so grave as to require extraordinary precautions." The Washington Post, and subsequently other newspapers, also began publishing from the Pentagon Papers.

This threat, the President said, provoked the creation of the Special Investigations Unit known as the "plumbers" headed by Egil Krogh, Jr., assistant to Ehrlichman. The unit included David Young from Kissinger's

NSC staff, plus E. Howard Hunt, Jr., and G. Gordon Liddy, with the latter two later to be convicted as Watergate burglars.

Publication of the Pentagon Papers furthered the interests of the left wing of the political spectrum, the attackers of U.S. policy in Indochina. Daniel Ellsberg's hope was that the disclosure of secretly planned, deepening involvement in the war by Kennedy and Johnson administrations would force a halt in the war. The Nixon administration obtained restraining orders against the Times and the Post and carried the case to the Supreme Court to prevent further publication. But it was unable to convince the high court that further publication would seriously undermine the Nixon administration's conduct of foreign policy.

Just 10 days after the first account of the Pentagon Papers appeared in print, Beecher's June 23, 1971, article on the strategic nuclear arms talks (SALT) appeared in The New York Times.

According to a new analysis by an impartial specialist that has just appeared in the bookshops, "Cold Dawn, The Story of SALT," by John Newhouse, the Beecher article aroused "rage" inside the Nixon administration.

"July 23d, alas," Newhouse wrote, "happened to be the day when the American delegation was beginning its presentation of the new U.S. position to the Russians. The Beecher article performed the same service, laying out the essentials and even revealing one of the American fall-back positions.

"The article contained a major inaccuracy; a statement that the U.S. (nuclear) freeze (proposal) would not permit Moscow to complete those submarines under construction. This, of course, was the delegation's position stoutly backed by some elements in the Pentagon, Beecher's normal beat. It was not, however, the official position."

Newhouse wrote that "the FBI spent four months trying to run down the source of the leak . . . Unless the President and Attorney General have information available to no one else, the daring culprit is unknown. Nor can anyone, even now, establish his motive."

"Some think," Newhouse continued, "it was an effort inspired in some part of the Pentagon to sabotage the talks. Others saw Beecher as used by someone operating in behalf of some high official who wanted to freeze the U.S. position—to discourage any fallback—by going public with it. In fact, these are nothing more than random guesses."

Sources in the White House have said privately that six persons in the Pentagon were shifted out of their positions as a result of that leak. At least one thing is clear: no one in authority attributes that leak to a leftist or dovish source. Beecher himself evidently is free of dovish taint so far as the Nixon administration is concerned, for he recently was appointed a deputy press spokesman in the Pentagon.

Out of that SALT investigation came the use of lie detector tests in the State Department with CIA technicians proposed by the

Plumbers in the White House.

And out of the security-leak-hunting Plumbers group came the break-in at Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and the admitted forgery by plumber E. Howard Hunt Jr., of two cables designed not for security purposes but for political purposes to attempt to tie the late President Kennedy directly to the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

Was the underlying objective of the security-hunting phobia national security or politics, or a strange mixture of both?

The record indicates that the "extraordinary actions" taken by the Nixon administration in the name of security were extraordinary overkill. On Jan. 25, 1972, President Nixon disclosed that for 30 months, starting Aug. 4, 1969, the Nixon administration was able to maintain total secrecy on one of its most sensitive diplomatic initiatives.

President Nixon, in revealing that prolonged sequence of secret negotiations between Kissinger and North Vietnamese politburo member Le Duc Tho starting in 1969, disclosed that Kissinger "traveled to Paris 12 times on these secret missions."

"There was never a leak," the President boasted, "because we were determined not to jeopardize the secret negotiations."

That extended operation in secret diplomacy began two years before the Plumbers reached the White House. This suggests that national security could have been readily preserved without them.