

WHAT FOLLOWS is a summary of those intricate and intriguing news accounts that have appeared in the last few days and dealt with a strange internecine conflict within the administration.

In mid-1971, the military command in the Pentagon, apparently feeling closed out of the President's tightly held major diplomatic initiatives, arranged on its own to get certain documents and notes of meetings from the White House. Some of this material seems to have found its way to columnist Jack Anderson. When Anderson published an account of a National Security Council meeting on the Indo-Pakistani war in December, 1971, an angry Henry Kissinger—he was then Mr. Nixon's national security adviser in the White House—ordered an investigation of the leak. The "plumbers," established some months earlier, turned to the task and found a "ring" of military personnel taking unauthorized information from Dr. Kissinger's files and meetings.

What then happened to those somehow involved? One junior person reportedly attempted "blackmail" by threatening to expose the operation to public view if he were not given a "very high post"; he did not get such a post but was not disciplined and was kept on in the government. The Joint Chiefs of Staff liaison at the NSC, a rear admiral, was given a new and important Pentagon position; he denies involvement. A clerical aide, a yeoman, was transferred; he says he promised the Navy "to never talk about what happened." A supposed recipient of the information, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, who is the country's top military officer, was reappointed to a second two-year term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs; he denies any link to unauthorized information "from Dr. Kissinger's office."

As for Mr. Nixon, for 18 months, ever since the existence of the "plumbers" came to light, he has resisted investigation of them on grounds that disclosure would harm the "national security." A number of officials now privately say that the Pentagon spying case is what he had particularly in mind. In its single public comment on the Pentagon spying case, made last Friday in response to the first limited press reports on it, the White House did not explicitly acknowledge even that a charge of Pentagon spying had been made. Rather, the statement singled out "deliberate leaks to the media of extremely sensitive information of interest to other nations" and said "the source of these leaks was a low-level employee [apparently the yeoman] whose clerical

tasks gave him access to highly classified information." (Columnist Anderson denies the yeoman was his source.) Further disclosures would be "inappropriate," the White House said. "It may be that at a later time the facts can be made public without detriment to the national interest."

In brief: The Pentagon spied on Dr. Kissinger. When the operation came to light inside the government, it was covered up: the principals were given minimal or no reason for personal embarrassment, and preemptive disclosure of the matter was made to key legislators—complete with the usual "national security" argument for maintaining the strictest secrecy. Now that the operation has come to public attention, the White House is trying to breeze right by.

No doubt this is not the full story. It is enough to make plain, however, that the "villain" of this piece, as of so many others, is President Nixon's obsession with secrecy, rationalized without warrant or compelling justification as an imperative of "national security." In making his openings to Peking and Moscow and in searching for a way out of Vietnam, he had a broad choice between soliciting, on the one hand, the understanding and support of the Executive bureaucracy—and, in their respective times and ways, the Congress and the public—and, on the other hand, conducting a lone operation. Mr. Nixon chose the latter course. Did he think the Pentagon would sabotage his diplomacy? Even for a President with Mr. Nixon's savvy for the possibilities of political ambush from the right, this seems an exaggerated not to say offensive consideration. Whatever his reason, his choice led in this instance to a shabby espionage operation that induces one not so much to gasp as to cringe. Discovery of the operation led all too inevitably to a coverup—and perhaps not only between the President and the Pentagon. Dr. Kissinger offered the Senate seemingly categorical assurances that he had no knowledge of the intelligence activities of David Young, his former aide who—according to the new reports—ran the investigation, which Kissinger ordered, that unearthed the Pentagon plot. These assurances look very strange now.

None of us needed at this time yet another demonstration of the dangers of running the presidency as though it were a game of solitaire. Quite enough damage to our institutions and our values has already been done. But we keep learning more and it is still not possible to tell when the lesson will be done.