

Chasing a Spy Ring

Its Secret Is Safely Locked Away in Confusion

By Laurence Stern
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It has been a wondrous and confusing week in the annals of Watergate journalism.

The tale of the alleged Pentagon spy ring opened with dark overtones of "Seven Days in May." But as the story evolved it was veering toward "Catch-22" with accents of "M*A*S*H."

If there was a grave national security issue at the heart of the matter, as the President and his attorneys have indicated, the secret was still secure with the network of "well placed," or "informed," or "authoritative" anonymous sources who have been talking to reporters over the past few days.

Did Henry Kissinger order a wiretap on the office of former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird? (Chicago Sun-Times)

Did President Nixon want to fire Adm. Thomas Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, because of the alleged spy ring? (Chicago Tribune)

Was the file-snitching operation the handiwork of a full-fledged "military spy network" (New York Times) or of principally two officers? (Washington Post)

Was it a major breach of White House secrets, as some sources indicated, or was it "rinky-dink," as other informants insisted.

It all seemed to boil down to which paper you read and what informed sources they quoted.

When the spy story broke under bold banner headlines in the Chicago Tribune and on the Scripps-Howard wire last Friday, informed sources were claiming that Admiral Moorer was receiving documents stolen by military subordinates in the White House.

The next day, Saturday, the Chicago Sun-Times reported that an aroused Kissinger, the President's senior NSC staffer, ordered a wiretap in the office of then-Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird. The Sun-Times further reported that before the Laird tap was installed a "bug" was implanted in the White House office of Kissinger aide Wayne Smith, an NSC analyst privy to strategic arms and Vietnam strategy secrets.

And so there unfolded in

the press the specter of a full-scale cloak-and-dagger struggle between White House and Pentagon with national security secrets spilling out as a byproduct of the hostilities.

Was the alleged military spying episode the much-advertised national security matter cited by the President and his lawyers in connection with the White House "plumbers" investigation by federal Watergate prosecutors?

Yes, some sources told The New York Times and The Washington Post. No, said other sources to both newspapers.

It was a crucial difference. The White House had invoked the danger of a na-

of the leak led to discovery of the alleged military spying episode.

But there has been no explanation by the White House what national security interest might be endangered by prosecution of the White House special investigation unit operating under Ehrlichman's direction.

Journalistic and public confusion over the details, the seriousness and significance of the so-called spy story seemed to stem from the varying source channels tapped by the reporters who covered the story.

Some White House officials registered the highest concern with one presidential aide contending (The New York Times) that Mr. Nixon wanted it kept secret to protect the "whole military command structure."

Last Sunday "senior officials in the White House, Justice Department and FBI" told The Washington Post that the White House had made unwarranted use of the national security issue to restrict investigation of the "plumbers."

On Wednesday the Times appeared to reach a similar conclusion. Its sources were now saying that the spying episode had been blown out of proportion.

Yesterday FBI sources told The Washington Post that the only information picked up on the tap of one of the prime military spying suspects, Yeoman Charles Radford, were a series of obscene phone calls made by an associate of the yeoman's.

And the Pentagon on Wednesday came up with its own preliminary finding on the document-snitching affair.

"There was some over exuberance and some impropriety," said Defense Department spokesman William Beecher, "in the liaison activity between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council."

But, Beecher cautioned, Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger still "isn't satisfied that he's got the whole story."

Nor, it might be added, is any newspaperman who has covered the confusing series of events. And certainly not the reader—in Chicago or Washington or New York.

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tional security breach when it sought last summer to discourage criminal indictments of key aides associated with the "plumbers" activities — specifically John D. Ehrlichman, Charles Colson and Egil (Bud) Krogh. So The Washington Post was informed, at any rate, by informed sources.

The White House said last Friday that its national security concern in the military spying episode was that it involved "deliberate leaks to the media" of sensitive information of interest to foreign powers.

This was presumably an allusion to the leak of minutes of White House meetings, chaired by Kissinger, on the administration's strategy in the Indo-Pakistan war during December, 1971. It was this series of meetings during which Kissinger was quoted by columnist Jack Anderson as announcing that the President favored a policy of "tilting" toward Pakistan.

The main consequence of the leak to Anderson was to confirm what was already publicly evident from the pattern of the Nixon administration's diplomacy toward the crisis on the subcontinent — that official U.S. policy was tilted toward Pakistan. The Paks had been important brokers in arranging for President Nixon's trip to China.

Columnist Anderson wrote yesterday that the "plumbers" investigation