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Military Watergate?

The strange case of the admirals, the yeoman and the Kissinger files is beginning to appear as silly as the Watergate "caper"—and perhaps as serious.

More questions were raised than answered by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Moorer, when he acknowledged publicly that he was a receiver of purloined White House documents. The papers were removed from Henry Kissinger's National Security Council offices by Navy Yeoman Radford, an enlisted clerk, and brought by hand to Admiral Moorer's desk by Radford's superior, Rear Admiral Welander, the Pentagon's liaison officer at the N.S.C.

Admiral Moorer denies that he knew at the time that the papers were obtained improperly. He scoffs at the report that a military "spy ring" functioned with his knowledge to inform the Chiefs of Staff of Mr. Kissinger's secret negotiations in 1971 with North Vietnam, China and Russia and in regard to the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT I). Yet, when a White House investigation revealed the illicit means through which the documents came into his hands, Admiral Moorer merely transferred Radford and Welander instead of disciplining or court-martialing them. The White House and Admiral Moorer are now minimizing the breach of security as simply a matter of "overzealousness" and "overexuberance."

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Fundamental issues of national policy are raised by the allegations of military spying on the White House and the subsequent cover-up. It occurred at a time of major relaxation of civilian control of the military under former Defense Secretary Laird. Simultaneously there was a sharp increase in the influence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on national security policy, as promised by President Nixon in his 1968 campaign attacks on the civilian "whiz kids" brought into the Pentagon by former Secretary McNamara.

During this period a trend was established that has resulted in the appointment of generals and admirals to eleven of the less than fifty key policy-making positions of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense—positions created over the past quarter-century as part of an effort to provide unified civilian control over the three armed services. The question now is not only whether civilian control has been relaxed too much, but whether the military are beginning to become "politicized" to a degree that has been seen in other countries but never before in the United States.

Has overinvolvement in high policy decisions led some military leaders to reach for even more influence? The documents misappropriated from Mr. Kissinger's files reportedly contained invaluable ammunition for the internecine policy wars that go on behind the scene in Washington, although Admiral Moorer states that those he saw dealt only with military matters concerning Vietnam.

Enough is now known to justify open Congressional hearings so that the country can judge for itself what the facts are.