

Questions About That 'Spy Ring'

By Tom Wicker

Curiouser and curiouser grows the case of the young Navy yeoman, who is accused of having stolen secret White House documents and passed them along to high Pentagon officials, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer.

Charles E. Radford, the yeoman (the Navy's name for an enlisted man who does office work), says that while he was attached to Henry Kissinger's national security staff in the White House, he was directed by his Navy superiors to steal top secret documents and pass them along to the Pentagon. He provided them with hundreds of such documents, he says, and many of them went to Admiral Moorer, whom Mr. Radford pictures as having been pleased by his work.

The Admiral, however, as well as high White House officials, has sought to play down the importance of the yeoman's activities, and to deny that he was acting on military instructions. As they tell it, Mr. Radford was an over-zealous youth who shipped over to the Pentagon a few documents that contained only information already known to the Joint Chiefs and other defense officials.

The matter can hardly be left to rest there; obviously someone is not telling the truth. Aside from the fact that it seems thoroughly implausible that an enlisted man, acting on his own, would steal documents and send them to his superior officers, Admiral Moorer himself says he recommended a court-martial for Mr. Radford, but that "civilian leadership" decided not to proceed. Why? And what civilian leadership?

High White House officials have publicly played down the importance of the matter, terming it a case of an enlisted man who "was told to keep his eyes open and who went ape" as well as a matter being blown "ter-

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ribly" out of proportion. Yet, the White House said formally on Jan. 11 that it touched on "a matter peripheral to a national security issue which was found to involve deliberate leaks to the media of extremely sensitive information of interest to other nations." The statement went on to say that "the Administration still considers it inappropriate for public disclosure."

The alleged spying operation also had been the subject of a major investigation in 1971 and 1972 by the so-called White House "plumbers"; David R. Young of that shadowy unit submitted a lengthy report as a result of the investigation. Seymour Hersh of The New York Times has established that it was this investigation and the report to which Richard Nixon referred last November, before the Associated Press managing editors, when he spoke of a plumbers' operation "so sensitive that even Senator Ervin and Senator Baker have decided that they should not delve further into" it.

Mr. Nixon was explaining why he had originally resisted and delayed a Justice Department investigation of the plumbers, who had later carried out a break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Moreover, Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and Attorney General Elliot Richardson, before they were fired, are said to have been at least briefly convinced that the plumbers' investigation of the Pentagon spying operation was so "sensitive" that inquiry into the plumbers' activities had to be limited.

What is the truth here? Was this really a case of an enlisted man who "went ape" and embarrassed the chairman of the Joint Chiefs? Or a matter so serious that it had to be covered up on grounds of national security, and even set outside legitimate inquiry by the Watergate prosecutor and a Senate committee?

If the spying operation existed, why was Admiral Moorer not relieved of his high post following David Young's report in 1972? In order to keep the matter secret? Because it might have been embarrassing to the Administration in an election year? Because the Administration was prosecuting Daniel Ellsberg for what it called "stealing" the Pentagon Papers and did not want to admit that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs was having classified documents stolen from the White House?

If Yeoman Radford was directed to steal documents, moreover, why did the Pentagon have to go to such lengths? Was the White House passion for secrecy and its paranoia about leaks so great that the military was being denied information it needed? Or was the military seeking improperly to penetrate areas of civilian policy-making in which it had no legitimate voice? Surely these are questions Senator Stennis' Armed Services Committee, which is investigating, cannot leave publicly unanswered.

On the other hand, maybe the Pentagon "spy ring" represented no more than hard bureaucratic infighting for closely held information. If that is assumed, however, the smell of another cover-up becomes overpowering; for in that case Mr. Nixon could have had no legitimate reason to picture the matter as "so sensitive" that it barred inquiry into the plumbers' operations.