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The Moorer Affair

Testimony by Secretary of State Kissinger and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the Senate Armed Services Committee's inquiry into military spying in the White House presents a profoundly disturbing picture of civilian weakness and ethical confusion at the highest levels of the Government.

From the outset of this discreditable affair, Admiral Moorer has offered public explanations and denials that are now shown to have been seriously misleading. Contrary to his original version, he did not receive merely a couple of batches of documents that he was not authorized to see. Hundreds of documents were pilfered from Mr. Kissinger's White House office by a Navy clerk and sent to Admiral Moorer over a period of many months.

Those documents were not superfluous copies or of no interest "because they contained no new information." In reality, Admiral Moorer received an "eyes only" report prepared by Mr. Kissinger on his first talk with Chinese Premier Chou En-lai and intended solely for the President. The Admiral also received documents that informed him of many details of the secret Paris peace talks with the North Vietnamese that were not provided to him by normal channels.

After President Nixon learned in December, 1971, of this spying, Admiral Moorer's liaison office at the White House was abolished and its staff, including the light-fingered clerk, transferred. But no disciplinary action was taken and a few months later, President Nixon reappointed Admiral Moorer for another two-year term as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

The President's line of reasoning remains undisclosed. All that is clear is that he reappointed Admiral Moorer even though the latter had used underlings to spy upon him. When a President condones such improper and insubordinate behavior on the part of the highest uniformed officer, then civilian control of the military becomes more shadow than substance.

Although the truth is gradually becoming known, Secretary Kissinger and Admiral Moorer even at this late date are less than candid. The Admiral minimizes the spying as the work of an "over-exuberant" clerk and "just an exchange within the organization." Even worse, he appears to have been willing in 1971 to make the clerk a scapegoat and prosecute him alone. That is scarcely how responsibility should run in a military chain of command.

For his part, Secretary Kissinger is still offering explanations like this: "I think some eager beaver was trying to get brownie points with his superior, and his superiors, being extremely busy, never bothered to shut it off, especially since they were not really getting anything to which they need to pay particular attention."

Such explanations are implausible. Young enlisted men, no matter how eager, do not steal documents from the President of the United States and pass them to admirals unless they are encouraged and protected by someone much higher in rank. It is too late now for doubletalk and dissimulation. It is time for everyone involved in this matter to tell the truth, the whole truth.