

Yeoman's Service

IT IS CONCEIVABLE that Adm. Thomas Moorer, the nation's top military officer, was not conducting an espionage operation against the President in the 15 months of 1970-71 when a Navy yeoman was surreptitiously collecting "hundreds" of the most secret White House documents and passing them to the Pentagon. It is conceivable — but, on the basis of testimony so far given to the Senate Armed Services Committee, just barely so. For the whole thrust of the public record, when read against the bureaucratic and political backdrop of the time, is that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was running an espionage operation at the White House to obtain information which the President wished not to share with him; that the operation was uncovered only inadvertently through a White House investigation of a leak to columnist Jack Anderson; and that a rather shabby deal was then struck between the White House and Pentagon to keep the whole thing quiet.

Adm. Moorer and Rear Adm. Robert Welander, who headed the Pentagon's White House liaison office while Yeoman Charles Radford worked as a clerk-typist there, insist they did not order him to filch documents. Indeed, there is no written record that they did. It was Yeoman Radford's "over-exuberance," they suggest, that led him for 15 months to comb through burn baskets, make carbons, take copies and scribble notes about the Nixon administration's secret diplomacy. But this is astonishing. The yeoman says Adm. Welander and others instructed him to get everything "I could get my hands on"—and "don't get caught." Veiled but unmistakable praise for his diligence came from two captains on Adm. Moorer's personal staff. Over-exuberance? Whose?

Why might Adm. Moorer have wished to spy on the President? Was he guided by a familiar bureaucratic

itch to collect every scrap of information within reach? Was he apprehensive over the direction and pace of administration diplomacy? There is no evidence at all of any plot or plan to sabotage Mr. Nixon's diplomatic initiatives. But that does not alter the fact that the Pentagon was putting itself beyond the President's control—by gathering information in this fashion; by thus putting itself in a position to undercut Mr. Nixon if it chose; and, finally, by taking no steps to discipline itself once the intelligence operation was revealed.

It is not clear just what happened when the White House "plumbers," under John Ehrlichman's over-all supervision, started looking for the source of the leak to columnist Anderson. Apparently, the larger operation was then unearthed. Mr. Ehrlichman blamed Adm. Welander. The admiral, in turn, says this is a false charge based on statements which Mr. Radford gave Mr. Ehrlichman to get back at Mr. Welander for fingering him in the newspaper leak. Adm. Moorer indicates that he is now on the griddle as a result of leaks from the former "plumbers" who, facing trial, wish to support a claim that they were indeed working to protect legitimate national security secrets.

At any rate, President Nixon—for reasons it would be interesting to learn—was evidently unwilling to take on the Pentagon. Adm. Welander was quietly transferred from the White House—to a good job, indicating no retribution. Ditto Yeoman Radford. Adm. Moorer was reappointed to a second two-year term as head of the Joint Chiefs. Closing ranks, Secretary of State Kissinger, a prime target of the spying operation, now echoes Adm. Moorer in blaming "eager beaver" Radford. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger submits that Adm. Moorer was "not in my judgment at all familiar with the exuberant methods" used by the yeoman. It smacks, in a word, of coverup.