



Bewildering Case of Purloined Papers

— Joseph Alsop

THE CASE of the purloined papers drizzles on and on. The cast of characters is irresistible: Secretary of State Henry Kissinger; the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas Moorer; two other admirals; a sly naval yeoman; the White House "Plumbers", and so on and on.

For a considerable period during the previous Nixon Administration, a highly trusted naval yeoman, Charles E. Radford, was assigned for duty with the National Security Council. While on this duty, Radford regularly took copies of the most secret Security Council papers and passed them back to the Pentagon.

Yeoman Radford has testified that he began this practice of purloining papers because his first boss in the Security Council apparatus, Rear Admiral R.C. Robinson, asked him "to do a job for the Joint Chiefs."

★ ★ ★

THE PURLOINING WAS THEN discovered. All sorts of sinister charges were bandied about. But in the end President Nixon took no punitive action against anyone; so we are hearing further sinister charges today.

If all this also sounds a mite bewildering the answer is to please recall the way the government really worked in 1970 and 1971.

At that period, Kissinger, working under the President and solely for the President, was making virtually every foreign policy decision of any consequence. With respect to the Vietnamese war and some other urgent situations, Kissinger, again working under the President, was also

making many military decisions of the highest importance.

To put it mildly, this state of affairs was not immensely enjoyed by the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense of that period, who were William Rogers and Melvin Laird. It would again be putting it mildly to say both Laird and Rogers hated Kissinger's guts.

Furthermore, both men saw all policy decisions from a viewpoint diametrically opposite to the Kissinger viewpoint. So you had a situation in which Kissinger was perpetually at daggers drawn with "the bureaucracy" — his own shorthand phrase for the State and Defense Departments.

★ ★ ★

THIS HAD two practical consequences relevant to the case of the purloined papers. On the one hand, Kissinger went to enormous lengths to keep secret all major policy decisions until they were accomplished facts, beyond being much damaged by "the bureaucracy." By the same token, "the bureaucracy" also went to enormous lengths to find out what the devil Kissinger was currently up to.

The main things to understand are quite simple. It was normal for Kissinger to play his cards close to his chest. It was normal, again, for those who so hated him to want to know what was on those cards.

No matter who did what to whom, however, it was never much more than standard infighting of the usual intra-governmental type. Hence it was also normal, finally, for the President to say, "let's shut up about it," when he made that decision at the end of 1971.