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Each Other's Mail

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, May 8—Secretary of State Henry Stimson closed down the "black chamber"—the State Department's code-breaking office—on the principle that the way to make men and nations trustworthy was to trust them. As he later told aide McGeorge Bundy, "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail."

Mr. Stimson made that remark in 1946, after he had been Secretary of War and had encouraged the establishment of a vast American intelligence community. To him, what was fair and necessary in wartime was wrong when nations were striving to construct a peace.

Throughout the cold war, Mr. Stimson's words were cited as a quaint peep of moral stiffness by C.I.A. men convinced that fire had to be fought with fire. His words, treated as if they had been spoken in 1929, seemed an anachronism to those charged with insuring the nation's survival.

Now, however, in this period of détente, we view the adoption of totalitarian means to combat totalitarian threats as less than wise; as we have come to understand that we cannot overcome our enemies by becoming them, we have stopped romanticizing the professional spy. The time of the thin-lipped Hunt and the hot-eyed Liddy is out of joint, for derring-do has changed to derring-don't.

Throughout the rise and fall of the romance of American espionage, one technique that permeated the profession was the science of eavesdropping. In the seventeenth century, that word was coined to describe secret listeners who stood so close to the outside wall that they were untouched by water falling from the overhanging eaves; in the twentieth century, eavesdropping was made easier by electronics, and to hear each other's conversation became the quintessence of "reading each other's mail."

That willingness to listen in, to put the needs of national survival ahead of the restraints of what Mr. Stimson considered national gentlemanliness, to penetrate personal privacy in order to preserve national secrecy, was second nature to Richard Nixon. He and his chief foreign affairs lieutenant, both children of the cold war, were determined to end the cold war, and a willingness to eavesdrop came with the job.

Step One, using the F.B.I. The President and his men—sure of the necessity of such action to protect the national interest—began to eavesdrop on the men in the press and in the White House to find the sources of leaks.

Step Two, when the F.B.I. appeared squeamish, was to create a "special investigations unit" in Room 16 of the Executive Office Building, which was willing to eavesdrop, or worse, in order to plug the leaks.

Step Three down the eavesdropping road was the transfer of the ability to eavesdrop for avowedly security purposes over to political campaign purposes, as the Hunt-Liddy team moved to the re-election committee. Belatedly trying to figure out what went wrong, H. R. Haldeman explained to the President that John Mitchell had grown so accustomed to eavesdropping that he must have lost his sensitivity to the illegality of wiretaps.

Even at that time, when the meaning of the events the previous year were being driven into the Oval Office, the habit of eavesdropping was so ingrained that it was natural for John Ehrlichman to suggest that he make a recording of his confrontation with John Mitchell. As the transcripts show, the President told him to go ahead and "gear up" for electronic eavesdropping, adding that he personally did not want to listen to the tape.

The irony is so exquisite as to be unbearable: Here was Ehrlichman suggesting that he eavesdrop on the man accused of authorizing the Watergate eavesdropping, *unaware that his own conversation planning to bug the bugger was being bugged.*

That is the triple dead heat of eavesdropping, the royal flush or unassisted triple play, the ultimate hat trick—a plot twist that would have made E. Phillips Oppenheim blush before using.

The President's willingness to go along with the indiscriminate eavesdropping on all his advisers and visitors should not surprise us, seen as the final massive dose of the poison he had been sipping steadily for years. It was not wrong, he felt, because it would be used for the right purposes—for History, for Truth.

I am not among those who think the President guilty of an impeachable high crime. An addiction to eavesdropping was his grievous fault, and grievously hath he already suffered for it. The man who was ready to eavesdrop to protect the confidentiality of his office was, in Hamlet's words, "hoist with his own petard"—a petard is a bomb, and this one has blown Presidential confidentiality sky-high.

Because Mr. Nixon would read everyone else's mail, we are now forced to read his own, hardly an edifying activity, and in so doing we see why Henry Stimson was right.