

THE QUESTION has now been raised whether Secretary of State Henry Kissinger spoke truthfully last fall in describing his role in the earlier wiretapping of some of his White House aides. Since the question goes not only to his personal integrity but to his effectiveness as a public official, the answers deserve to be promptly and rigorously pursued. Neither Dr. Kissinger's world prominence nor his importance to Mr. Nixon's defense against impeachment should spare him scrutiny any less close than that accorded to other administration figures touched by one or another branch of the poisonous Watergate tree.

At the moment, the evidence is suggestive but inconclusive. In describing the wiretapping during his confirmation hearing as Secretary of State last September, Dr. Kissinger said his role was confined to identifying staff members with access to information that had leaked. The actual decision to apply wiretaps, he testified, was made by the President in consultation with the then FBI director and the Attorney General.

Said Dr. Kissinger on Sept. 7:

*When this administration came into office, for a period of many months it was confronted with leaks to the press of documents that were considered of the greatest importance to the national security. These included discussions of National Security Council deliberations, of procedures in the case of emergency, of contingency planning, and of specific military operations . . .*

*In early May 1969, the President consulted the then Director of the FBI and the Attorney General about the best methods to deal with this problem. He was told that the most effective method was to apply procedures that had been followed also in previous administrations; that is to say, to tap individuals according to specific procedures. He was assured by the then Attorney General that this procedure met the legal requirements.*

*At that time I had been in the government for four months, and I must say that it did not occur to me to question the judgment of these two individuals.*

*Certain criteria were then established, to follow precise procedures. These criteria were access to information that had leaked, and also information that might be developed in the course of the investigation.*

*My office was required to submit the names of those officials that had had access to the information that had leaked, because my office was a natural place for this information to exist.*

*The information was then transmitted by General [Alexander] Haig to Inspector [William] Sullivan of the FBI.*

Now, however, we have a transcript, leaked out of the

House Judiciary Committee impeachment proceedings, of a presidential tape of Feb. 28, 1973, in which President Nixon is recorded as saying during a discussion on wiretaps: "At least I know not because I know that I know that he [Kissinger] asked that it be done." Just what was it that, in this jumbled sentence, Mr. Nixon was saying that Dr. Kissinger had asked be done? To somehow check certain staff members for leaks? To tap them? We need to know—though in the absence of Mr. Nixon's own clarification of the passage cited, this cannot be easily accomplished.

Then, House Judiciary Committee members, reporting on a committee staff briefing which was itself based on FBI summaries of wiretap logs, told journalists this week that Dr. Kissinger had "initiated" taps of subordinates. This confirms, or duplicates, then-Attorney General Elliott Richardson's statement to the Foreign Relations Committee last fall: "The FBI records indicate that there were requests for wiretaps of identified individuals, in one case by Dr. Kissinger and in two instances on his behalf by then-Col. Haig." Do these statements on the particular point of what is in the FBI records contradict Dr. Kissinger's broad assertion—an assertion entirely supported by Mr. Richardson, by the way—that the Secretary supplied names but did not ask for taps? Plainly, the word "initiate" is subject to more than one reading. Again, we need to know. In this case, Dr. Kissinger should be able to supply at least part of the answer.

Finally, at his press conference on Thursday, Dr. Kissinger declared under questioning that he had not made "a direct recommendation" for wiretap surveillance. The context of his words left open whether he was inferentially admitting he had made an "indirect" recommendation—something he has previously denied—or whether he was simply expressing displeasure with the journalists' line of questioning.

That the Secretary was displeased—indeed, flustered and uptight—was evident. It is a sign of what Watergate has done to the general perception of this town that the mere fact of public discombobulation itself produces diverse interpretations of its own. It should be said for Secretary Kissinger, however, that he recovered sufficiently from his irritation at the press to assert that he will answer the questions of "any duly constituted committee of Congress or any other investigating agency."

This is the path down which this matter now must go. A garbled presidential sentence or a fourth-hand account of wiretaps or press-conference responses by a disconcerted Secretary do not suffice to clarify either the allegations now being made against the Secretary or the responses he offers to them. Since the issue centers on what he originally told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, it is the committee's duty to recall him and to do its best to determine whether he spoke the truth.