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Disassembling Intelligence

Diplomatic triumphs notwithstanding, Secretary of State Kissinger continues to be haunted by revelations of wiretapping operations against members of his own staff, allegedly conducted with his knowledge and cooperation. The origin and purpose of these invasions of privacy remain ambiguous but there can be no ambiguity about their implications.

In testimony under oath before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Kissinger has conceded supplying names of aides whose home telephones were subsequently tapped, but he repeatedly denied requesting that such eavesdropping be conducted. This denial became somewhat more hedged last week when the secretary told a news conference only that he had made "no direct recommendation."

If that is so, it is evidently not how President Nixon understood it. Among the transcripts from the White House now available to the House Judiciary Committee—deleted from the published versions—is reported to be a discussion of the wiretaps, with the statement by Mr. Nixon that "I know that he [Kissinger] asked that it be done." Another reported transcript has H. R. Halde- man telling John Mitchell that the taps were requested by Mr. Kissinger. The records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation reveal that wiretaps were requested by both Mr. Kissinger and his then-deputy, Alexander M. Haig, Jr.

Mr. Kissinger had explained that this surveillance was only to discover the source of "national security" information that had leaked to the press. But it seems that three of the first four officials tapped did not have access to the secret information that had leaked out, and two other officials who did have such information were not put under surveillance. The taps were also maintained on the personal telephones of several individuals long after they had left government service, without further access to national security affairs.

We regretfully observe that Secretary Kissinger seems to be vulnerable to the charge of dissembling about his role in this distasteful affair. If there are to be more serious charges, that is up to the Congress and the courts to decide. For months past, the various concerned parties to the case have been reluctant to press their complaints too vigorously against a Secretary of State deeply engaged in sensitive diplomatic activity of obvious import to the nation.

But sooner or later this whole dismal episode must have its full airing in a proper forum. The implication of letting the wiretaps go unchallenged is intolerable. Persons entering public service should not have to expose themselves, their families and all those with whom they talk on the telephone to the hidden web of electronic surveillance that Americans are used to associating only with the totalitarian regimes of the world.