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This Is Burlesque

By Russell Baker

Most people who have given up reading the news from Washington, which is to say most of the last sane people left in the country, are probably baffled by Henry Kissinger's sudden entry into the general farce down there. It is like seeing Othello wander into the second act of "Hair," stripped down to blue jeans, and start climbing the scenery.

To savor the full essence of the thing, you have to understand that Mr. Kissinger is angry because he has been accused of lying in a small way. It is the diplomat's job, of course, to lie in a big way. A diplomat, goes the ancient wheeze, is a man prepared to lie for his country, and most of us probably assumed that Mr. Kissinger was as prepared as the next diplomat to do his duty.

But now, lo and behold, Mr. Kissinger is not content with merely being recognized as a genius; he wants to be proclaimed a man of absolute veracity and threatens to do no more service for the state unless Congress declares him an honest man.

It is hard to tell what has happened to Mr. Kissinger's celebrated judgment. Being declared an honest man by Congress would strike most of us as a social embarrassment akin to being chosen Man of the Year by the Mafia.

That Mr. Kissinger is now demanding that this iron laurel be pressed upon his brow testifies to the derangement which is epidemic along the

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Potomac. Any man in full control of his faculties would surely rather be known as a small-bore liar than pronounced honest by Congress.

Congress, ever ready for public burlesque, jumped at the Secretary's demand with its usual zest for the ridiculous. A resolution proclaiming Mr. Kissinger a patriot "whose integrity and veracity are above reproach" was endorsed by 39 Senators between dawn and dusk in a single day without, so far as can be determined, anyone's bothering to observe that too much veracity might be a serious flaw in a diplomat.

Understanding the dispute about whether Mr. Kissinger has played fast with the truth requires a medieval scholastic's intellect capable of caring how many angels can dance on the point of a pin.

The question is whether he "initiated" wiretaps that were placed on telephones of friends, colleagues and reporters. Mr. Kissinger told the Foreign Relations Committee that he did not "initiate" the taps. They were "initiated" by others, he said, and he merely supplied names of men who might fruitfully be listened in on, after the higher decision was made.

To make any sense of this requires a fine understanding of what Government people mean by "initiating" something, and the trouble here is that they don't really mean anything that can be defined without Philadelphia lawyers, all of whom are now relocated in Washington debating the meaning of "an impeachable offense" and "executive privilege," which don't really mean anything either.

Mr. Kissinger's trouble arises because the newspapers published a "leaked" F.B.I. paper stating that "original requests" for the taps "were from Dr. Henry Kissinger or Gen. Alexander Haig," who was then Mr. Kissinger's deputy.

Publication of the "leaked" F.B.I. paper produced the final twist of the comedy by giving the Government's people another chance to repeat their well-rehearsed "Shame-on-the-leakers!" act.

The aim of that splendid old routine is to change the subject so that everybody will stop thinking about the main plot-line and start worrying about the evils of journalism.

It works like this: The papers publish a "leaked" document showing the Government has been playing dirty pool. The Government's men ignore the revelation. Instead, they denounce the papers for publishing material which the Government didn't want the public to see. This is accompanied by statements that the published material will damage the national security, destroy the judicial system and, otherwise accelerate rot in the moral fabric.

The argument assumes that whatever the deviousness or lying or criminality may be that has come to light, the greater evil is having it appear in the newspapers. And so, when the "leaked" F.B.I. paper made things awkward for Mr. Kissinger, the Government people replied by crying "Shame on the leakers!"

If this practice were common in nongovernment life, a man could murder his wife, tuck the body in the back lawn and count on the police to put all their energy into pressing trespassing charges against any busybody who reported a grave-sized mound behind the petunia patch.

In the Kissinger business Senator Goldwater characteristically smelled "treason" in the newspapers and was joined by less colorful talkers in deploping the idea of a well-informed citizenry.

In real life somebody would suggest taking a look at this unfortunately published evidence, but this is not going on in real life. It is going on in Washington, which is a comic book.