

Editor's Report

Much ado about nothing

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NEW YORK — The Watergate hounds, to their obvious surprise, succeeded in bringing a prize quarry to bay this week. No one was more astonished than they when Henry A. Kissinger — of all people — responded to their tentative yapping at his heels by threatening to resign if they didn't stop.



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It scared the pack — this dramatic reaction to charges which even its leaders concede are relatively trivial. Pompous editorials promptly appeared in lighthouses of the liberal press confessing that Kissinger's momentous diplomatic achievements must continue at all costs.

What happened at Kissinger's emotional press conference in Salzburg on Tuesday was unique. Never before, literally, had a Secretary of State of this nation threatened to quit over such inconsequential

criticism in matters of less substance.

And never had a more esteemed and valuable Secretary of State threatened to quit under any circumstances.

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It most assuredly was a case of a molehill becoming a mountain — in this case another sickening example of how Watergate concerns get exaggerated out of all proportion.

What's it all about? That's the simple first question for understanding this curious episode in our history, and one whose answer is so simple as to be almost beyond belief. What it's all about is merely whether Kissinger directly ordered a bunch of wiretaps in the interests of national security, or was indirectly responsible for them.

That's it — and the truth is mostly a matter of interpretation. In testimony last Sept. 7 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee considering confirmation of his present post, Kissinger swore he did not specifically initiate the taps. His critics claim to have evidence indicating he may have had a more direct role than he admits, and therefore charge he may have committed perjury before the committee.

Here's how wispy the whole controversy is. Listen to Kissinger's explanation of his role first, as given in his Austrian press conference last Tuesday.

He is explaining what happened in 1969-71 when, as the President's chief adviser on national security, he was connected with 17 controversial wiretaps placed on 13 government officials and four Washington newsmen. Some of the officials were high aides in his own office.

"On a number of occasions," Kissinger said in Salzburg, "I called the attention of the President to what, it would seem to me, were very significant security leaks. This led the President, and I believe on the recommendation of the attorney general and the director of the FBI, to institute a program of wiretapping.

"I did not, myself, propose this program. I also was unaware that such a program had been carried out in every previous administration since Franklin Roosevelt.

"In retrospect I would have to say I undoubtedly contributed by my description of the security problem. But I did not recommend the program, though this does not mean that I disagreed with it. A choice had to be made."

As stated before, critics of the secretary contend they have evidence that Kissinger did directly order the taps, even though the FBI director at the time — J. Edgar Hoover — would hardly take such orders from an underling. In rebuttal, the secretary admits he supplied names for FBI surveillance, but denies specifying how the surveillance was to be done.

So the whole fracas boils down to this: Just how responsible was he for the taps — all made after written authorization by the attorney general, incidentally — and did he dissemble under oath on the extent of his responsibility?

Sen. Barry Goldwater was dead right when he called the controversy a case of "nit-picking." Basically it doesn't mean a damned thing.

What really was important was that Kissinger believed that some of the nation's most serious diplomatic interests — and thus its security — were being jeopardized by publication of information the administration thought best kept secret.

To him—and to the President and attorney general who agreed with him — it appeared that certain newsmen were being fed inside information on various matters relating primarily to the Far East. The story most alarming to the administration was disclosure of our secret bombing of Communist targets in Cambodia, which had the tacit approval of the Cambodian government.

Now it so happens that most of the stories were the result of enterprising journalism, not leaks. The Cambodian bombing, for example, was first reported by a British newsmen who got the facts by flying over the Ho Chi Minh trail. Out of all the 17 approved wiretaps, only one case of information leakage was discovered.

Much has been made of this by the Watergate critics. They claim it was an outrage that so many ethical men were subjected to a surveillance which violated their constitutional rights to privacy. Since most of those involved were innocent, this sense of outrage is wholly understandable. But the other side must be understood, too.

It really doesn't make any difference whether there were secrecy leaks or not. The point is that Kissinger, as operating head of the government's top advisory group on such matters, thought there were leaks. He reported his convictions, repeatedly and emphatically, with the result that President Nixon ordered the taps as a priority matter of security.

It was the sworn duty of both men to act as they did. Kissinger would have been remiss in his position if he had not reported and protested what he considered were dangerous security leaks. Nixon would have been remiss in his duty if he had not taken appropriate action to plug them.

They did what they had to do. If you find water running out of what is supposed to be a sealed container, the logical assumption is that there is a leak somewhere. And the first thing you have to do is find the hole. That's what the wiretaps were for — testing to find a hole, and nothing else.

So — was Kissinger personally responsible for instituting the taps? You figure it out. And then try to figure out what difference it makes, one way or the other.

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KISSINGER, as he said, feels his honor has been impugned. He has asked a review of his Sept. 7 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the committee has agreed to do so. When it is over — and you can bet a pretty penny on it — he will be cleared again and this whole idiotic nonsense will evaporate as the much ado about nothing it really is.

But the main reason for the explosion, I suspect, is sheer physical and mental exhaustion. After 33 days of superhuman effort to achieve the remarkable Israeli-Syrian troop disengagement agreement, Kissinger had every right to expect the warmest of receptions on his return to Washington.

He didn't get it. Instead, at his homecoming press conference a week ago Thursday, a reporter stood up and brashly asked if he had retained counsel to defend himself against possible perjury charges. He reacted as if he had been slapped in the face — with astonishment, anger and a wounded pride which erupted in his emotional performance in Salzburg this week.

No one seriously expects Kissinger to resign. His sense of responsibility and pride in performance are too strong for that. And the whole world is too much in need of this man whose diplomatic miracles in Vietnam, China, Russia and the Mideast have done so amazingly much for the cause of peace.

All Henry needs is a really good vacation.