

Henry & Al & J. Edgar

ESSAY

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Sept. 29—Last year, after learning that I was among 17 Government officials and newsmen who had been illegally wiretapped, I called Al Haig to find out if President Nixon had known about the tap on my line.

"Absolutely not," said General Haig. "The President was shocked to learn about it just now."

That was not true. In testimony released yesterday as part of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's whitewash of the Kissinger-Haig role in wiretapping, Senator Fulbright asked: "So is it correct to conclude that the President personally requested that each of these individuals be tapped?"

Our next NATO commander replied artfully: "... three or four weeks ago the President signed a letter suggesting that he approved them, and, therefore, I believe that he did."

Then General Haig added a curious thought about Mr. Nixon's approval of each of these invasions of privacy: "Now, how formally that was done, whether it was done by Mr. Ehrlichman or Mr. Haldeman in his behalf, or Dr. Kissinger running it by him, I can't say."

Consider those words, because they reveal a conception of a plural President that is at the root of so much of the Watergate agony. When I recently remonstrated with General Haig for misleading me last year, he replied in the same vein: "You know, Bill, 'the President' is more than one man."

The idea of a hydra-headed President, with accountability diffused and blame unfixable, is the Kissinger-Haig defense against bearing responsibility for fervent sponsorship of an illegal White House spying operation. They were just "following orders" from a President who—in their eyes—was sometimes J. Edgar Hoover, sometimes John Mitchell, and once in a while the individual who had been elected to the job.

Spying on his colleagues was necessary, Dr. Kissinger explained over the sound of the sympathetic clucking of Senators Scott and Case, to show the fierceness of his own loyalty—after all, Henry had long experience in Washington under Democrats: "I was a friend of both Jack and Robert Kennedy. . . . In 1967 I conducted negotiations with the North Vietnamese for Harriman and Katzenbach. I saw a great deal of Robert Kennedy before his assassination and, of course, I was a consultant to the President then."

This decade-long record of top level Washington experience was suddenly forgotten by Dr. Kissinger when asked

to explain his remark to Director Hoover that Henry and his friends "would destroy whoever did this leaking."

"I was new in Washington," he explained. "I might have had a tendency to show him that I was alert to the danger of security."

Dead men tell no tales, Dr. Kissinger and General Haig have decided, and as expected they have tried to place the largest portion of guilt about the wiretaps at the doorstep of the F.B.I.

In most of the cases, the orders to wiretap had been requested by deputy F.B.I. Director William Sullivan, who said he received surveillance requests from Al Haig. Mr. Hoover would then get written authorization from the Attorney General and the taps went on. But Messrs. Kissinger and Haig now claim that the F.B.I. documents lie, swearing they knew nothing about certain of the taps that were attributed to them.

Whom does that leave holding the bag? J. Edgar Hoover, who was deep-sixed by the grim reaper a while back, and William Sullivan, who insists that General Haig did indeed make the wiretap requests he now denies.

If we are to believe the accounts of the Kissinger-Haig who-me? defense, we must believe that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was run with no concern for professionalism, with embarrassing activities left lightly covered by stories that could readily be disavowed, which was not the way J. Edgar Hoover was known to operate.

The conflict in testimony between the Kissinger-Haig defense and the testimony of the living F.B.I. men is absolute: Somebody is committing consistent perjury, and nobody in Government is interested in finding out who's lying.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee investigation was a joke; the committee recoiled from the clue that Dr. Kissinger dropped about yet another F.B.I. program of wiretapping, not yet revealed.

The special prosecution force does not find illegal wiretapping ideologically satisfying and has dropped it. The last I heard from Leon Jaworski was a message relayed to me by Al Haig a few months ago to "tell your man Safire to lay off." General Haig said he had told the special prosecutor I was not his man.

Which is true enough. Al Haig has boasted to colleagues in San Clemente of a \$200,000-a-year offer in the private sector from the Rockefellers. Let him take it.

The post held with honor by Generals Eisenhower, Gruenther, Ridgeway and Norstad should not go to the overly-good soldier who, to this day, thinks that "the President is more than one man."