

The Nixon story you never heard

By Joan Hoff

Over three decades ago on December 21, 1971, Richard Nixon approved the first major cover-up of his administration. He did so reluctantly at the behest of his closest political advisers, Attorney General John Mitchell, Domestic Counselor John Ehrlichman, and Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman. The public remains ignorant of this seminal event in Nixon's first term and journalists and historians have largely ignored it. The question is why? A recently released Nixon tape transcribed from an enhanced CD produced by the Nixon Era Center¹ provides the clearest answer to this thirty-year-old Nixon secret.

On that December day Nixon agreed to cover up a criminally insubordinate spying operation conducted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff inside the National Security Council because of the military's strong, visceral dislike of Nixon's foreign policy. In particular, the JCS thought Nixon gone "soft on communism" by reaching out to the Chinese and Russians, and they resented Vietnamization as a way to end the war.

As early as 1976 Admiral Elmo Zumwalt publicly made these military suspicions and resentment abundantly clear in his book, *On Watch: A Memoir*. "I had first become concerned many months before the June 1972 burglary," Zumwalt wrote, "[about] the deliberate, systematic and, unfortunately, extremely successful efforts of the President, Henry Kissinger, and a few subordinate members of their inner circle to conceal, sometimes by simple silence, more often by articulate deceit, their real policies about the most critical matters of national security." In a word, Zumwalt, like many within the American

military elite, thought that Nixon's foreign policies bordered on the traitorous because they "were inimical to the security of the United States."

This atmosphere of extreme distrust led Admiral Thomas Moorer, head of the JCS, to first authorize Rear Admiral Rembrandt C. Robinson and later Rear Admiral Robert O. Welander, both liaisons between the Joint Chiefs and the White House's National Security Council, to start spying on the NSC. For thirteen months, from late 1970 to late 1971, Navy Yeoman Charles E. Radford, an aide to both Robinson and Welander, systematically stole and copied NSC documents from burn bags containing carbon copies, briefcases, and desks of Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, and their staff. He then turned them over to his superiors.

The White House became suspicious when Jack Anderson published a column on December 14 entitled, "U.S. Tilts to Pakistan." Such information logically could only have come from meetings of the Washington Special Action Group, December 3 and 4, which discussed the fact that Pakistan was being used as a conduit for the top secret negotiations the Nixon administration was carrying on with China - negotiations that would culminate in rapprochement with that Communist nation the spring of the next year. Clearly someone had leaked the minutes of the WSAG meeting to Anderson and the suspicion fell on the military.

The White House immediately ordered an investigation of this leak and Pentagon Chief Investigator W. Donald Stewart subsequently uncovered the JCS spy operation when Yeoman Radford "broke down and cried" during a polygraph test, indicating that he spied with the "implied approval of his supervisor" Admiral Welander. Stewart believed that it was a "hanging offence" for the military to spy on the president and Ehrlichman's assistant, Egil ("Bud") Krogh

¹ NIXON ERA CENTER: <http://www.nixonera.com>

thought that it was the beginning of a military coup because of the interference it represented "into the deliberations of duly-elected and appointed civilians to carry out foreign policy."

Radford's confession not only led to such dire evaluations, but also to the December 21 conversation among the president, Ehrlichman, Haldeman, and John Mitchell.

The most striking aspect of this tape is the passive role played by Nixon - the so-called original imperial president. First, he is out-talked by the others throughout this fifty-two-minute conversation. Toward the end of tape, the president can be heard saying to his advisers in a loud voice that the JCS spy activity was "wrong! Understand? I'm just saying that's wrong. Do you agree?" A little later he called it a "federal offense of the highest order." Up to this point, however, John Mitchell told the president that "the important thing is to paper this thing over" because "this Welander thing . . . is going to get right into the middle of Joint Chiefs of Staff."

In other words, Nixon would have to take on the entire military command if he exposed the spy ring. Moreover, this expose would take place in an election year and when the president had scheduled trips to both China and the Soviet Union to confirm improved relations with these countries - which the military opposed. Taking on the military establishment with such important political and diplomatic events on the horizon could have proven disastrous for the president's most important objectives and revealed other back-channel diplomatic activities of the administration. Later in his memoirs the president said that the media would have completely distorted the incident and exposure would have done "damage to the military at time when it was already under heavy attack."

In contrast, at the time all three men agreed with Nixon about the seriousness of the crime committed by the JCS. Mitchell even compared it to "coming in [to the president's office] and robbing your desk." However, they advised

him to do no more than to inform Moorer that the White House knew about the JCS spy ring, to interview Welander (who was later transferred to sea duty), and to transfer Radford. Moorer subsequently denied obtaining any information from purloined documents, fallaciously claiming that Nixon kept him fully informed about all his foreign policy initiatives. If this had been true there would have been no need for Moorer to set up a spy ring. Welander, for his part according to this tape, had initially refused to answer questions about the spying he was supervising on the questionable grounds that he had a "personal and confidential relationship" with both Kissinger and Haig.

Nixon became incensed when he heard this. "Just knock it out of the ballpark, stop that relationship," he told his aides on December 21. Subsequently in his first interview Welander admitted his role in the naval surveillance operation, and implicated then Brigadier General Alexander Haig, Kissinger's aide and liaison between the Pentagon and the White House, in this criminal operation. Haig ultimately prevailed upon his old friend and colleague Fred Buzhardt, general counsel to the Defense Department, to re-interview Admiral Welander and eliminate the compromising references to him. Still the existence of this first Welander interview continued to haunt Haig because he knew if the president found out there would be no more military promotions for him, let alone a future in politics and so he was determined to see that his role in this affair remained under raps.

Haig has succeeded in covering up his involvement down to the present day. For example, he told an interviewer in 1996 that the whole JCS spy ring was nothing more than the normal kind of internal espionage that goes on all the time among executive branch departments. Nonetheless, after he became Nixon's chief of staff, he went to great lengths to ensure that the various congressional investigations never concentrated on the Moorer/Radford affair, thus preventing exposure of his involvement in spying on the NSC while Kissinger's aide. When caught in the tug-of-war between the Joint Chiefs of Staff

and the White House, Haig's loyalties to the very end remained with the military.

This December 21 tape also indicates that Nixon did not trust either Kissinger or Haig. At one point he stated that "Henry is not a good security risk" and that he was convinced that "Haig must have known about this operation . . . It seems unlikely he wouldn't have known." Yet after Watergate forced the resignations of Haldeman and Ehrlichman, Nixon appointed Haig his chief of staff! Had the president chosen to ignore the advice of his closest aides in December 1971 and follow his own instincts about exposing the JCS, Haig's culpability would have become evident and his career under Nixon would have ended and quite possibly prevented him from serving in both the Ford and Reagan administrations.

By covering up JCS spy ring (but letting the military know they knew about it) Nixon and his aides apparently deluded themselves into

thinking they would have greater leverage with a hostile defense establishment. However, the JCS also knew that Nixon and Kissinger had been bypassing both Secretaries of State (William Rogers) and Defense (Melvin Laird) in making their foreign policy decisions and could have retaliated with the charge that civilian leaders had been deliberately ignored in the administration's back-channel processes.

This successful cover-up of the Moorer-Radford affair set the stage for more minor cover-ups ultimately culminating in the mother of them all - Watergate. As a result it should be considered the first and most important of the Nixon cover-ups. Had it not take place perhaps Nixon would have survived his second term in office.

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