

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE B15

THE WASHINGTON POST
2 December 1980

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Project Aquarium: Tapping the Tappers

The secret tapping of the telephones of innocent Americans supposedly came to a crashing halt with reform legislation which was enacted five years ago. But it didn't.

A loophole in the law, designed to give the Good Guys a break in the continuous game of espionage with the Russians, permits Uncle Sam's spooks to listen in on any phone conversations the Kremlin's agents have tapped.

As a result, thousands of phone calls to and from government officials, businessmen and other Americans have been clandestinely recorded by both U.S. and Soviet snoopers. And thanks to the loophole, this eavesdropping—by the American tappers, that is—was perfectly legal.

It was also totally unproductive.

The operation, code-named "Project Aquarium," has been traced to the early days of the Carter administration, intelligence sources told my associate Dale Van Atta. And one of the unwitting targets was President Carter's good friend and attorney general, Griffin Bell.

For reasons that make sense to the convoluted reasoning of the espionage community, the government has done little to stop the Russians' electronic monitoring of phone calls in this country. Since 1977, the bugging has been done from the Soviet Embassy in Washington, the Russian consulate in San Francisco, two of their offices

in New York and several other secret locations.

The CIA wanted to crack the New York operation. The reason is that two-thirds of all long-distance calls travel by microwaves, and much of that traffic is beamed through transmitting towers in New York. The Russians simply rent a hotel room and tap into one of the towers with sophisticated equipment.

They use a scanning device to zero in on the few hundred phone numbers they're interested in—government officials privy to state secrets, business executives discussing confidential matters, perhaps the mistress of an important man who would then be susceptible to blackmail.

Unfortunately, the CIA just didn't have the electronic expertise to horn in on the Russian snoopers. After trying for months with no success, they finally turned to the National Security Agency for help.

For the NSA—which once, in "Project Canute," reconstructed messages from the acoustical tape of someone typing—the monitoring was like shooting fish in a barrel. Within a week the agency's wizards were tapping the Russians' radio monitors and hearing everything they heard.

One early result was a surprise: The NSA tapped the Soviets tapping Attorney General Bell, who was overheard discussing classified information on an unsecured line. Bell was

quickly informed, though the leak was "more of a joke than a serious thing," in Bell's words.

Thousands of phone calls by hundreds of individuals were subjected to Project Aquarium's double U.S.-Soviet eavesdropping, long after the furor over Watergate-era domestic surveillance had subsided. But intelligence sources say the project never turned up so much as a nugget of significant information.

The most the NSA monitors learned were the identities of Americans who excite the Russians' interest—which in most cases is obvious. "I've never seen the need for that kind of intelligence," said one CIA official. "It's wasted."

Footnote: To its credit, the NSA resisted Bell's efforts to get hold of its tapes. He particularly wanted any that might have shed some light on the Koreagate scandal. In a showdown at the White House, the president ordered the NSA director to inform Bell if any of the taped conversations had relevance to the investigation. The director said none did.

But some experts are concerned that the loophole allowing federal tapping of innocent citizens—so long as the Russians tap them first—could be used as a means of returning to the bad old days of indiscriminate domestic snooping that was discredited by the Watergate excesses.