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Honesty, Morality and the Pike Committee

In pulling back last week from a shameful release of the House Intelligence Committee report, the House of Representatives was honoring a guarantee made by President Ford after Republican congressmen begged him to avoid a constitutional crisis.

Mr. Ford last September had hardened into a position that the leak-prone committee, headed by Rep. Otis Pike of New York, should get no secret material whatever after its damaging leak involving the Yom Kippur war. He changed his mind and guaranteed the good faith of the committee to his intelligence chief only after all four Republican members virtually begged him to break the dangerous deadlock in a private letter.

The secret one-page letter, never published, set in motion the cycle of dramatic events just ended when the House refused to allow Pike's committee to issue its final report until sanitized by the President. That unprecedented House vote signaled a change on Capitol Hill that for the first time in 13 months, puts a political chill on indiscriminate leaking of secret information that has damaged, perhaps grievously, this nation's position in the world.

Nobody knows whether the new mood will hold now that the House has ended its probe and the Senate Intelligence Committee is winding up its investigation. Whatever happens next, Mr. Ford's intimate role in ending the deadlock is an untold story bearing heavily on last week's crushing defeat for Chairman Pike.

Mr. Ford's fury over the committee's security breach last September involving U.S. intelligence just before the Yom Kippur war was such that he closed the door on all classified submissions from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to the House committee.

What terrified the committee's Republicans was the nightmare picture of President Ford dragged kicking and screaming all the way to the Supreme Court where, in the presidential election year, he would be ordered to turn over classified documents to the House. In short, a Nixon-Watergate tapes replay could not be tolerated for Gerald Ford and the decimated Republican Party. The result was the letter to Mr. Ford signed by Rep. Robert McClory of Illinois, the committee's senior Republican.

The President's change of mind came at a White House meeting shortly after he read McClory's letter, and in the face of a strong no-compromise position by both Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and William Colby, then director of the CIA.

Colby, whose cooperation with the Senate committee seemed boundless, was bitterly upset at the House committee's leak revealing CIA knowledge about Egyptian communications on the eve of the 1973 war. Kissinger, a personal target of the House committee which wanted him held in contempt of the House, was equally bitter.

Thus, after the President himself had been persuaded to abandon his no-win position by McClory and Republican House leaders, Mr. Ford turned to Colby and asked: "Bill, can't we give them what they want?"

Colby's response: Yes, sir, but we must retain the power of prior clearance for actual publication of any classified material that goes to the Pike



By Mike Peters for the Dayton Daily News

committee.

Mr. Ford then in effect offered himself as guarantor of the committee's good faith. He pledged to Colby that if the full committee approved the plan he and Pike had worked out—no release of state secrets without prior clearance—he personally would oversee it and act as final arbiter of disputes.

Further, the former House member from Michigan gave those present to understand that no House member and no House committee would dishonor any agreement so carefully constructed as this one.

That was the background for the CIA's submission of every significant document asked by the Pike committee and for the incredible decision by nine members of the 13-member committee to release its final report despite the CIA's objection that it included 240 specific security breaches.

This was the decision the House flattened. That the report's juiciest

parts had already been leaked is shameful, given the Pike-Ford agreement. But those leaks cannot obscure the change of mood that has resulted from this interplay between a President whose most distinguished virtue is honesty and a House committee majority that cannot justify its actions.

Pike himself is now saying that if the report is not released, President Ford stands guilty of the worst "coverup" since Watergate.

Some suspicious congressmen seeking a motive for Otis Pike—until now one of the most respected members of Congress—believe Pike always wanted a grand court battle with the President. In the end, the Supreme Court would surely have ruled for Pike.

Instead, the Democratic-controlled House rolled over its own committee, giving notice at long last that the House of Representatives, too, has occasion to look out for its name, reputation and honesty.

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