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Page 2-4-76

In the Name of National Security (Again)

Here we go again. In the name of national security, the House of Representatives has agreed to let President Ford sit as editor-censor for his report on the abuses of the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

Mr. Ford apparently will be free to make whatever deletions would be necessary to avoid embarrassment for him, his subordinates or his predecessors in office, thanks to the 246-to-124 House vote against immediate public release of the Pike Committee report.

No doubt the report contains a number of things (some of them already leaked) that could create profound embarrassment for the administration—evidence of clear-cut law violations, for instance, or of just plain stupidity, incompetence and ham-handedness. But were it not for the possibility of just such embarrassments, there would have been little point to the investigations in the first place, and to leave it to the President to decide what will or won't be made public is to reduce the entire exercise to a charade.

For a self-righteous moment after Watergate, we boasted that we had learned the dangers of the so-called "imperial presidency" without effective

check or balance. The impeachment proceedings, we told ourselves, made clear that it would be a long time before the Congress again salivated to the bell of "national security."

Well, it wasn't so long after all, for here we go again. And probably an important reason for this quick fall from grace is that our representatives in Congress are persuaded that we wanted them to do what they have done.

The public seems to have concluded that too much tampering with the CIA and the other secret agencies would weaken the country's ability to defend itself. Maybe it would. Or maybe it would only weaken the ability of this and future administrations to undertake secret policies it would never take to the people for approval.

In any case, there is a distinction between tampering with agencies and setting rational limits on them. The chances are better than ever now that we will come out of this whole inquiry without ever really addressing that distinction.

There's a better-than-even chance that we won't even get around to addressing the basic distinctions between spying (which most of us would probably accept as a

legitimate necessity) and surreptitious political and military actions calculated to produce not information policy results that have not even been mentioned to us or our representatives, let alone debated.

The former is "intelligence" by anybody's definition. The latter is a sort of real-life "Mission Impossible," except that it always comes out right on TV. Most of us have no idea when our so-called intelligence agencies crossed the line from one to the other.

Most Americans would support the duty of our government to find out, through surreptitious means, what our potential enemies may be up to, even if the effort necessitates such unlawful acts as burglary, theft, bribery or interception of private communications.

But there is a difference between finding out what is happening or likely to happen and covert efforts designed to make something happen. It is the difference between FBI infiltration of domestic political groups to learn of their plans (however distasteful even that may be to some of us) and the use of infiltrators as agents provocateurs, the difference between joining groups and entrapping them.

It is one thing to try to find out as much as possible about, say, the Italian political situation in order to help our government make intelligent policy decisions. It is another thing to use American agents—and secret American money—to force a particular political result in Italy.

It is one thing to use diplomatic pressures to keep in power a foreign government friendly to our interests. It is another to create, in "Mission Impossible" fashion, a situation that could lead to assassination or civil war.

It is one thing to find out as much as we can about the plans of a particular faction of the Angolan freedom fighters or even, based on that intelligence, to lend military support to one or another faction.

But that support ought to be the result of policy debate with congressional consideration, not carried out secretly in the name of "intelligence."

If we are going to empower the President to wage secret war against those he privately deems to be our enemies, we ought to pass the appropriate laws, after full debate. At the very least that would force us to call it by its right name. And that name isn't "intelligence."