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Treehouse Mentality on the CIA

Washington admires conscience in the abstract, but when confronted with the real thing, it instinctively moves to stamp it out. Rep. Bob Torricelli offers the latest illustration.

Torricelli (D-N.J.) blew the whistle on the CIA activities in Guatemala, lifted the curtain on scenes that made the blood run cold. A Guatemalan colonel named Julio Roberto Alpirez, an agency hireling, was involved in the deaths of an American citizen and a guerrilla leader married to an American. U.S. taxpayers found out that they were subsidizing torture in a small Central American country.

The New Jersey congressman, a member of the House intelligence committee whom colleagues regard as extraordinarily ambitious, said he had not acquired the information from the committee, and so was not bound by either committee or House rules to conceal classified material. He said he was bound by a higher law, anyway, like the U.S. Code, which requires a citizen to report murder to the authorities.

On its first day, he noted, the new Congress voted to bind itself to the same laws that everyone else has to live by.

Torricelli had taken the precaution of consulting House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) and former intelligence committee chairman Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), his party's most magisterial member, before he made his statement. But few Democrats have publicly rallied to his cause. In telling secrets, Congress prefers the approach of former defense secretary Robert S. McNamara, who, 25 years after it could do anyone—except him and his publishers—any good, wrote memoirs recounting Vietnam mistakes that many high school students at the time were pointing out.

Torricelli's disclosures come late, too—more than 100,000 Guatemalans have been killed to keep the country's murderous military in charge—but at least they could help shape the long-delayed debate about what the CIA is and should be doing.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) immediately gave tongue for those who feel the only responses in cases that threaten the military-industrial complex is to shoot the messenger. With scant thought that he seemed to be suggesting that it is more reprehensible to reveal murders than to commit them, he proposed to expel Torricelli from the intelligence committee. But after he realized that he might make Torricelli a martyr as well as a hero, he relented.

Intelligence committee Chairman Larry Combest of Texas announced the solution at a Capitol Hill news conference. Torricelli would be hauled up before the ethics committee. If the House crowd moves at the pace of its Senate counterpart, which still has done nothing in the moss-covered matter of Sen. Bob Packwood (R-Ore.), it could be years before Torricelli gets his due. Meantime, he can attend intelligence meetings.

Combest, a stocky, earnest man, inadvertently put his finger on the problem that makes these periodic and hideous revelations inevitable. "It's very difficult for us to expect the agency to respect us if we divulge information."

He has, like so many members, got hold of the wrong end of the stick. Actually, it is the failure of Congress either to grasp or enforce the principle of congressional oversight that has given the CIA a license to commit excesses outside the law and human decency. Checks and balances do not apply in Langley.

Did Congress ever make sure that anyone was disciplined for the staggering blunder of overestimating the Soviet economy, a bad guess we still pay for?

Did Congress insist on punishment for the crime of agency spying on U.S. citizens during the Vietnam War?

Did Congress demand the total reorganization that Church Committee revelations indicated? It gasped and bleated, but took no action. More recently, in the case of Aldrich H. Ames, a few retired wrists were slapped. Now with the Guatemalan outrage, the spooks are still claiming they can't compromise "sources and methods."

Why does the CIA operate with "unredeemed arrogance"? Because that's what it was told to do by its founders. It was supposed to be meaner and tougher than the Soviet agents. The usual constraints did not apply—unless of course Congress were to insist, which it never has done.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) is one of the few who understands the trouble. Intelligence committee members are thrilled to be told secrets, he says, to know things no one else does. It's the evolution of the treehouse mentality of boyhood, and the CIA plays it so skillfully, that members believe their obligation is to the agency rather than the other way around.

Moynihan is the only one who knows that, like the Vietnam village, the agency has to be destroyed in order to save it. The CIA has to be reconstituted as an entity that reflects the Constitution and the democracy it's supposed to serve.