

Smokebombs and Sorensen

The first thing to be said about Theodore Sorensen's withdrawal yesterday from designation as Director of Central Intelligence is that he deserves full personal vindication against a subterranean stream of accusations made against him. For the most part, they were unjust or irrelevant and, as one Senator observed, smacked of conviction without a trial.

Consider, for example, the matter of leaks. Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, which was to pass on his nomination, are much concerned to demonstrate their capacity to keep secrets. They are said to have been shocked when they learned that Mr. Sorensen acknowledged, in two court affidavits, that he gave classified information to reporters during his years in the Kennedy White House. This is not a subject on which we are disinterested; indeed, one of the affidavits was made in the suit brought against this newspaper concerning the Pentagon Papers. But we do know something about the way government works; about how common—and proper—this practice has been for officials up to and including Presidents; and how few former officials would muster the simple courage Mr. Sorensen did to say so.

Then there is the question of personal use of Government papers, including classified papers, by outgoing Government officials. Mr. Sorensen freely concedes having done so. We are not sure, in the abstract, that this is a salutary practice. But there is no doubt that it is a proper one, validated by the conduct of Presidents, aides, and other high officials for years. Suddenly to single out and assail Mr. Sorensen seems unfair, even captious.

The suggestion of captiousness, even of an ideological campaign, against Mr. Sorensen is heightened by the

circulation of a variety of other rumors or irrelevant reasons for opposing him. These include the fact that he has been married three times, which, one would think, would be especially awkward grist in a Senate recently characterized as undergoing an epidemic of divorce.

What is equally regrettable is that these smokebombs of objection prevented his nomination from being considered on the merits. We were encouraged by his nomination last month and believe he would have performed creditably. Still, his nomination presented other, fairer questions. It was bruited about that he sought to avoid military service as a pacifist. The darker implication here is grossly unfair to him. But the inherent philosophical question would have been legitimate: Can someone with deep nonviolent views fully act on the need—awful, rare but conceivable—to be cold-blooded?

Still more important is the principle of accountability to Congress and to the public for which Mr. Sorensen's nomination seemed to stand. He has long urged the Congress to greater vigilance over the C.I.A. ("The word 'oversight' has two meanings," he once wrote, "and they chose the wrong one.") In his withdrawal statement today, he stated a worthy principle: "I believe in the application of moral and legal standards to national security decisions, including the limitation of covert operations to extraordinary circumstances involving the vital national interests of our country, with timely review by the appropriate Congressional committees and written authorization by the President and his senior Cabinet officials."

It is a worthy standard, one by which both President-elect Carter and the Senate should be judged as they now decide not only who should head the C.I.A., but how.