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CIA: A White House Remedy

Part
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The more the Rockefeller Commission's report on its investigation of the Central Intelligence Agency is studied, the clearer it is that there's not much wrong with the agency that a change of presidential performance wouldn't cure. Reform should begin at the White House.

The commission did not ignore the culpability of Presidents over the years, but it more or less confined itself to saying softly that only "some" of the agency's questionable activities "were initiated or ordered by Presidents, either directly or indirectly."

The actual record, however, indicates that most of major violations and most of the significant delinquencies can be traced back to White House pressure of one kind or another over the last two decades, regardless of whether the Democrats or Republicans were in power.

In rare instances, some of our chief executives have stepped up and accepted the blame for CIA undertakings that backfired. Dwight Eisenhower personally took responsibility for the U-2 incident, which set back détente with the Soviet Union for a decade. John F. Kennedy later took the blame for the CIA's disastrous Bay of Pigs Cuban invasion.

On the whole, however, the White House has consistently gone to great pains to conceal its pressures on the CIA, the chief reason being that the pressures were often motivated more by political than security considerations, as in former President Nixon's efforts to subvert the agency in the Watergate cover-up.

The full story of the CIA's assassina-

tion activities has yet to come out, but all signs suggest that these initiatives were essentially White House specials. Even now the public doesn't have all the facts about CIA's hidden role in overthrowing various foreign governments (as in Iran, Chile and Guatemala), but they could not have been undertaken except by presidential direction.

It is not easy even for the most courageous CIA directors to resist a determined President when, in the name of alleged national security, he wants something done that may seem improper, reckless or possibly illegal. Who is the director to challenge the commander-in-chief? Anyhow, uncooperative directors can readily be replaced.

Once in a long while an agency head will defy a President, as the late J. Edgar Hoover did when Nixon tried to establish a government-wide undercover spy and intelligence operation, involving proposed burglary and illegal mail interception. Hoover merely asked Nixon to put it in writing, which was enough to kill it, but the independence of the FBI chief was so rare that it is still being talked about. The other agencies involved, including the CIA, went along with Nixon's scheme.

The Rockefeller Commission suggests Presidents should be more scrupulous and CIA directors more principled. That would be nice, but it is not likely that future chief executives and CIA chiefs will, on the average, be any better than their predecessors.

"Simply an admonition of that kind is plainly not adequate," says Sen.

Frank Church (D-Ida.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee that is investigating all government intelligence. "What we need," Church says, "is a law with criminal penalties." And beyond that, as everybody, including the Rockefeller Commission, now agrees, is the need for relentless congressional monitoring of all CIA activity, especially in the political realm.

Since 1947, when the CIA was established, 150 resolutions have been introduced in Congress to provide different types of formal oversight of the agency, but up to now it has escaped being leashed. In recent years it has reported to a feeble, informal congressional "watchdog" group, which hardly ever meets and never asks questions when it does.

Not even the supersensitive Atomic Energy Commission, which guards the most crucial secrets of all, is free of strict congressional supervision. The CIA's argument against oversight is the alleged danger of "leaks." Opponents of the congressional Joint Atomic Energy Committee once said the same thing, and in almost 30 years there has never been a serious breach by members of that group.

Future CIA directors should welcome a similar permanent joint committee on intelligence, for then future Presidents would have to think twice before giving dubious secret orders that would have to be disclosed to a demanding oversight group, especially if it were headed up by someone with the purposeful integrity of a Frank Church.