

An Intra-A.C.L.U. Debate Far From 'Strident Dissension'

To the Editor:

In his Aug. 14 news article ["The Increasing Dissent Within the A.C.L.U.,"] David Burnham cites a disagreement between the national American Civil Liberties Union and its southern California affiliate over a bill now pending before Congress as evidence for the alarming proposition that the A.C.L.U. is "increasingly" engaged in "a compromise of principles," that the organization has been split into two "camps," that this disagreement "illustrates" the "increasingly strident dissension within the A.C.L.U." and that all of this is the work of "the staff of the A.C.L.U.'s Washington office," as if that staff was independent of the rest of the national organization.

Mr. Burnham's major source for all this disinformation is a woman whom he characterizes as "a leader in the California affiliate's formal protest." In fact, she is on neither the staff nor the executive committee nor the board of the California affiliate.

But while Mr. Burnham obviously spoke to her at length, and quoted her extensively to support his story, he did not find it necessary to speak to either the president or the executive director or the legal director of the A.C.L.U. itself. Had he done so, he might have learned the following facts:

- The bill he says we support, which would permit the C.I.A. "to cover up illegal domestic spying and other wrongdoing," we oppose and have opposed consistently. The bill we support is one which was amended, at our insistence, precisely to prevent such cover-ups. In fact, we only recently supported the House version of the bill, after every amendment we insisted on was adopted.

- The A.C.L.U. of southern Califor-

nia does not believe that the A.C.L.U. should support even this amended version of the bill. But this disagreement between the national A.C.L.U. and its southern California affiliate is not over principle and does not reflect any "split," much less illustrate "increasingly strident dissension."

Unlike Mr. Burnham's primary source, Ramona Ripston is a leader of our southern California affiliate; she is its executive director. Here is what she says, in a letter, a copy of which Mr. Burnham has had in his possession for two months:

"... almost everyone [on the southern California executive committee] agreed that this was legislation upon which reasonable people can differ. We are not angry with national [A.C.L.U.] nor do we view this as a 'split' in the organization. . . . [D]ifferences which are handled carefully demonstrate that we are truly a democratic organization."

- The A.C.L.U.'s position was not decided by the Washington office staff. It was decided by the national executive director, Ira Glasser, with the agreement of the former director

of the Washington office, John Shattuck, many months ago. It was discussed last May with the national A.C.L.U. executive committee, which did not object to the position taken.

At our southern California affiliate's request, it was again discussed in great detail by the national board of directors last June, which without dissent supported the staff's position. Both the executive committee and the national board are broadly representative of A.C.L.U.'s affiliates throughout the country.

Reasonable people can indeed differ, and we encourage debate and dissent within the A.C.L.U. because we believe it is healthy and results in better decisions. But to characterize the debate on this particular bill as Mr. Burnham has is inaccurate and unfair. We have respected Mr. Burnham as a reporter for a long time. But on this one he was very wide of the mark.

NORMAN DORSEN

IRA GLASSER

New York, Aug. 17, 1984

The writers are, respectively, president and executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union.