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Good Intentions

What a pack of fools and cowards I have nourished in my house; that not one of them will avenge me of this turbulent priest!

-Henry II of England

If the affairs of men and governments resulted only in that which was intended, the world would be a better place, the policeman's lot a happier one and psychiatry would probably go out of business.

But, alas, the unintended often happens and therein lies our threat to ourselves.

When Henry II roared his exasperation with Thomas Beckett it is doubtful that he really wanted someone to kill the turbulent priest who was also his friend. But four knights, perceiving power in anguish and believing that a king's wish was his vassal's command, did murder Beckett. It was not what that king intended.

When the Central Intelligence Agency was founded in 1947 to oppose and juxtapose the sprawled power of the Soviet Union, there was no intention of creating a similar sprawl of similar, sinister quality. Yet that's what we did as the interim report of the Senate Intelligence Committee demonstrates.

That is the dark revelation before us. This nation was founded on the premise that the uninhibited power of eighteenth century kings was a bad thing. Yet in this latter day we discover, within ourselves, a

bloody canker of uninhibited power that presumed to plot the murders of foreign leaders displeasing to the American vision of the world.

The Senate committee report is ambiguous on the role of a quartet of American Presidents. It is not certain that they ordered, condoned, refused to stop, or even knew about the assassination plots.

So let us, for a moment, assume the existence of virtue. Let us assume a lesser sin on the moral system of democracy—that the Presidents didn't know what was going on.

Operating on that assumption of virtue, we can take all sorts of curative and corrective measures against what we now know about our intelligence services. We can tighten congressional oversight, pass laws against plotting murder, even rearrange the Constitution to strengthen the assumption that a President is responsible for all that happens in his tenure—whether he knows about it or not.

Yet even if we did all of that and more, the dilemma of the exasperated king would still be before us. Around American Presidents there will always be perceptions of power in anguish, there will always be sinister toadies who consider themselves commanded by what they think are great men's wishes.

Thus, in the immensa complexity of our days do good intentions misfire. Therein, God help us, lies the threat to ourselves.