

U.S. Intelligence

No other country has ever, or could ever, go through the kind of public airing of its intelligence apparatus as the United States has in the past few months. Such a thing would be totally unimaginable in the Soviet Union, and not much more conceivable even in the European democracies.

There is no question that in the kind of world we live in, the U.S. must maintain an effective, dependable — and secure — intelligence system.

But while the Congress, the administration and the CIA ponder just how this is to be accomplished, while at the same time giving the people, through their representatives, better oversight and control over the secret undertakings of their government than they have hitherto had, it is essential that we keep this whole matter of intelligence in perspective.

The best intelligence apparatus in the world is utterly useless if those empowered to act upon the information it provides fail to do so, or wish it away, or distort it to make it conform to desired policy or preconceived notions.

Our own recent history provides more than a few examples of this.

Before World War II, the U.S. possessed that dream of all espionage agents, the ability to read the enemy's diplomatic code; in this case the potential enemy was Japan.

Yet during the latter days of 1941, when it was obvious that the Japanese were planning an attack this knowledge was ignored or disbelieved.

Again, in the Vietnam war, the U.S. had abundant and reliable forewarning of the Communist Tet offensive of 1967. But this information was suppressed because it ran counter to what some people wanted to believe, or wanted the country to believe. And again the penalty was the unnecessary loss of many American, as well as Vietnamese

lives.

For all the reputed brilliance of then-Secretary of Defense

Robert McNamara and others directing the war, the nation could have been just as well, or as ill, served if someone had simply stood blindfolded and thrown darts at a list of options.

We must also make the distinction between intelligence gathering, which is absolutely vital and not in dispute in the current discussion, and covert activities aimed at changing certain realities we don't like.

The CIA's role in the overthrow of President Allende of Chile, its alleged assassination plots against various national leaders, its secret financial support of anti-Communist politicians, however anti-democratic they may be, its violations of its charter prohibiting domestic spying, its booby-trapped Castro cigars — the list runs the gamut from the obscene to the ludicrous — all these activities have done more to harm America's real interests and to undermine its security than one can conceive happening if we had no intelli-

gence apparatus at all.

Despite all the soul-searching in Washington these days, the question facing Americans is not really that of how a democracy can have an accountable yet effective intelligence system, without running the risk of constant, damaging leaks of secret information.

Nor is it a matter of the quality or reliability of our intelligence people, although there are also instances of their wrongly evaluating data or having been caught napping.

Rather, the question, as it has been throughout history, is the uses or misuses to which a nation puts its intelligence establishment and the military and political information it acquires. And that, of course, ultimately depends upon the wisdom and integrity — nay, the plain common sense — of its leaders.

That requirement alone is enough to give us serious causes for concern about the safety of this Republic.