

Leo Cherne, our man with the CIA

The Ruling Class

By Robert Scheer

President Ford's boldest response to date to the disclosures of CIA malpractice has been the designation of a new three-man board to supervise the Agency's activities. Just why this new board should be any more effective than the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board that has counseled the President for 15 years without making a single public criticism of the CIA must be explained solely by the fact that it has three members rather than 15. For the three, Robert D. Murphy, Stephen Ailes and Leo Cherne, are the same sort of pro-CIA hard-liners who made up the original committee. Indeed, Cherne has been a member of the FIAB since 1973. A few days after Cherne's appointment, the *New York Times* disclosed that the International Rescue Committee, which Cherne founded in 1946 and of which he has been president ever since, was the recipient of funds from the Kaplan Fund, a conduit for CIA funds. Cherne denied that he knew of any CIA links with the Fund, and directed press inquiries to one Gilbert Jonas, who had been the IRC public affairs director and fund-raiser. Jonas also stoutly denied that he had any knowledge of any such CIA links and echoed Cherne's disbelief that the CIA would be at all interested in the work of an organization dedicated to the simple humanitarian goal of helping political refugees.

But from its inception, the IRC was interested in helping only a certain type of political refugee—politicians and intellectuals who would be useful in the Cold War fight against communism. These refugees, once spotted and assisted by the IRC, were then—when useful—recruited and trained by various government agencies to form free world "movements" that would oppose the communists.

One of the political refugees assisted by the IRC was a fellow named Ngo Dinh Diem, who, it will be remembered, fled the oppression of

his native land, where he had worked vainly for the French against Ho Chi Minh and was forced to find safety within the cloistered surroundings of Cardinal Spellman's sanctuary. After Dien Bien Phu, when the French sued for peace, Diem was brought out of his clerical mothballs and sent packing back to Saigon to save the day for democracy. Cherne followed Diem to Saigon, and, after much discussion with Diem and the U.S. in-country team, he was so impressed that he dispatched his assistant, Joseph Buttinger, an Austrian socialist refugee, to Saigon. Buttinger worked intimately for the next year with the CIA's top operative in Vietnam, Colonel (later General) Edward Lansdale. When I interviewed Buttinger and Lansdale in the



mid-Sixties, both Lansdale and Buttinger told me that they met on the first day of Buttinger's arrival in Saigon. A scant four days after Buttinger's plane set down, the CIA man took the IRC representative to meet Diem.

Buttinger returned to the U.S. and helped Cherne found the American Friends of Vietnam, which mounted a massive pro-Diem lobbying effort in this country that had a great deal to do with getting the U.S. into the Vietnam War. The pitch was that Diem's government was a lonely democratic outpost against the Commie hordes. At one inspired dinner, Leo Cherne's IRC combined efforts with the American Friends of Vietnam to present Ngo Dinh Diem with the Admiral Richard E. Byrd Award for "Inspired Leadership in the Cause of the Free World." (Six years

later the Friends group fired off a congratulatory telegram to the Saigon generals who had collaborated with the CIA in killing Diem.)

The Friends of Vietnam came into being two months after the public relations director for Cherne's IRC, one Harold Oram, signed a contract to have his public relations firm represent the Diem government in the U.S. Oram's "campaign director" on the Vietnam account was the aforementioned Gilbert Jonas (who later replaced Oram as IRC public relations director). Both men were registered as foreign agents acting for the Vietnamese government and both turned up as executive members of the Friends of Vietnam (and as PR officers of Cherne's IRC).

Since Jonas was the executive secretary of the Friends group and Cherne was an active board member, they should have no great difficulty in recalling the name of one Wesley Fishel, a fellow executive committee member. Fishel was the head of the Michigan State project in Vietnam: the story of that CIA cover is now well-known. Fishel was one of Diem's top advisers while his subordinate professor/CIA operatives in the project took over the Vietnamese secret police and several other agencies. For nine years Leo Cherne, Gilbert Jonas and Wesley Fishel formed an intimate political clique that attempted to mold American public opinion, and it has been amply documented that the Michigan State-Saigon end of the project was a CIA operation. Perhaps it is true that Cherne did not know of the Michigan State University-CIA connection, just as it may be true that he didn't know of Lansdale's CIA status. And maybe it is even true that Cherne did not know that the foundations that gave money to groups like his were conduits for the CIA.

But if all that is true, how in hell can it now be claimed that one so continuously suckered by the CIA—and one who has never so far as I know uttered any public criticism of the Agency—is now qualified to be one of the CIA's watchdogs? ●