

President's Citizens

By Mary McGrory
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President Ford has fashioned a blue-ribbon commission that is in effect a "safe house" for the Central Intelligence Agency.

If he really wanted to know the awful truth about the CIA's unadmitted and forbidden surveillance of American citizens, he would have chosen a constitutionalist, not Gen. Lyman F. Lemnitzer, and a civil libertarian instead of former Gov. Ronald Reagan of California.

What he is telling us is that he considers the New York Times' revelations a crisis for the agency, not for the country.

Reaction from Congress, which was not represented, was swift and fierce. Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, said that the eight-man group "guarantees tender, loving care for the CIA." Rep. Mike Harrington, D-Mass., called it "the establishment gathering to protect the establishment." Rep. Don Edwards, D-Calif., saw "a sweetheart arrangement" and Sen. Wil-

liam Proxmire, D-Wis., who is pressing for a special prosecutor, said it was "one-sided."

But the President cannot concern himself with such a trifling matter as the country's confidence in its institutions. He is on the verge of sending to Congress the heaviest military budget in history. He can hardly afford to call in tigers who might discover and publish secrets that besmirch the secret agency which conducts "paramilitary" operations.

He has assembled a group, which except for Edgar Shannon, a former president of the University of Virginia and an unknown quantity, is being asked to judge its own past.

The chairman, for instance, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, was for five years a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which could have or should have known about CIA activities at home. Rockefeller's old and deep friendship with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who thinks nothing of bugging his own

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Panel a 'Safe House'

staff, can be expected to mitigate any indignation brought on by discoveries of similar official, if illegal activity.

In the unlikely event that he pictures himself acquiring a name as a demon

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investigator, he will have Ronald Reagan, his old rival, breathing down his neck. Reagan's presence on the board is baffling unless one takes into account the President's anxiety to reassure the right wing of the Republican party that his administration will not be hard on an agency which was hard on critics of the Vietnam War.

It is difficult to imagine Gen. Lemnitzer flinging open closet doors in relentless search for skeletons. He was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of its most colossal known blunder, the Bay of Pigs invasion.

C. Douglas Dillon, former secretary of the Treasury, and John T. Connor, former

secretary of commerce, are both members in good standing of the Council on Foreign Relations, an organization which has ever endorsed unpleasant activities in the name of national security.

The labor member, Lane Kirkland, can be expected to be merciful. As secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, he has collaborated with the CIA in the formation of international "anti-Communist" unions.

The legal member, Erwin N. Griswold, former solicitor general, had two conspicuous chances to advance the public's right to know and to protect the individual's right of privacy. He flunked both. In the Pentagon Papers case, he argued against publication. In the Army espionage matter, he defended the military's right to spy on civilians.

As for Shannon, he comes recommended by former CIA Director James R. Schlesinger, who is now secretary of defense. He represents the academic community, and at least has no known history with the agency. He was a critic of the war. What is

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for CIA

hard to believe is that Schlesinger would have brought a boat rocker into the select circle. Shannon, however, represents the only hope.

The chairman is said to be conducting a talent hunt for a CIA director. If he wants the man to do his work seriously, he would have to fall ahead of, for instance, in the special prosecutor's office, which abounds in the kind of investigative talent he might not want to find. What would Ronald Reagan say if someone of the mettle of a John Doar, the counsel for the impeachment committee, turned up?

The President has suggested, by not taking a chance on a single dissident or outsider, that the situation is worse than had been supposed. Maybe, when Richard Helms, the former CIA director on whose watch the offense occurred, told him last Saturday that he had decided he could not stand the light of day and had to be scrutinized gingerly by men who could be trusted not to look too closely or tell any secrets.