

Sen. Church and the CIA Probe

Alleviating grave fears inside the White House, the select Senate committee probing the CIA is displaying uncommon discretion in avoiding any showdown with President Ford, a fact that first became clear with backstage events that began April 9.

On that day, a letter signed by Sen. Frank Church of Idaho, chairman of the 11-member select committee, was delivered to President Ford. It asked immediate submission to the committee of the confidential report prepared by CIA director William Colby for Mr. Ford last December after published reports charged the Central Intelligence Agency with spying on American citizens.

Church's letter, described by one top White House aide as "firm, but not peremptory," outraged the White House. Only one day earlier, the staff of the select committee had been privately advised by the White House that the Colby report would indeed be handed over.

Thus, White House aides, charged with meticulous monitoring of intelligence data wanted by the committee, suspected a transparent political ploy: that the Church letter was designed to put the President in the humiliating position of bowing to the committee after the decision had already been made to turn over the Colby report.

But the anger quickly turned to conciliation, thanks to Chairman Church. Within 24 hours, he agreed in effect to recall his letter without any response from Mr. Ford. Presidential aides believed Church himself was unaware the White House agreed to turn over the material.

That closely averted crisis established a tone between committee and

administration that both Church and Republican Sen. John Tower of Texas, the committee's vice chairman, are intent on continuing. White House aides are not so sure, but they have become more hopeful that the raw politics inherent in purple exposes of the CIA will play second fiddle to the need for careful investigation. (With its chief hired only last week, the House select committee's investigation could be another matter.)

One obvious reason for the Senate spirit is Church's conviction that his committee, crossing the spectrum from Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona on the right to Sen. Gary Hart of Colorado on the left, must stay united or his investigation will explode into politics. So far, the committee has voted unanimously on every issue it has taken up.

There is, however, a second, more significant reason. Church is a philo-sophic dove steeped in the isolationist traditions of the American West, but he is no radical fire-eater. Having spent weeks peering into the bubbling caldron of CIA operations, and learning first hand about the extent and variety of its work the past 35 years, he has resolved close issues in favor of the White House.

As one committee member told us: "Frank is leaning over backwards to avoid getting the CIA's blood on the committee's hands or his own. He knows this country needs an intelligence system."

Some committee liberals, aware of the chairman's caution against pushing the investigation too hard or too fast, are showing mild signs of unhappiness. While nothing approaching a schism has developed among com-

mittee Democrats, Church may have more trouble controlling them than holding down the Republican side of the committee.

The Democratic unrest stems from this fact: On half a dozen separate issues involving CIA or White House refusal to turn over raw files to the committee, the administration had tentatively decided to invoke executive privilege; each time, however, the committee backed down.

Although it did not quite reach the executive privilege stage, one incident provides a good example. The committee, after pulling and tugging, was given a voluminous summary of an internal CIA report on the agency's problems containing anonymous criticisms by its own employees. The committee staff asked for names.

At first, Church went along with that request. But when the administration pointed out the flagrant unfairness of attaching the names of CIA employees to their own in-house criticisms, he backed off. If the committee does insist on the individual criticisms, the authors' names will be blanked out, as they certainly should be.

The CIA and the White House are working hard to keep Church's probe moving cooperatively. Extraordinarily stringent security imposed by Church and Tower on the committee and its staff, with most staffers assigned to specific pieces of the investigation and barred from across-the-board access, has worked well so far. In prospect, then, is a reasoned, fair and non-inflammatory Senate examination of the embattled agency, one that at least can avoid the worst excesses so feared at its start.