

John Marks

Post 6/6/76

Lying to Congress

Government officials have lied with such frequency in recent years—and been caught after the fact—that the public and the press no longer seem to get excited about false or deceptive statements. There may still be a crime called perjury on the law books, but like most of those Nixonian denials, it has become largely “inoperative.”

Indeed, Richard Kleindienst, who was once the country's top law enforcement official, lied before a congressional committee in 1972, and he was given a meaningless suspended sentence for having committed a misdemeanor.

Now President Ford has appointed a man named Harry Shlaudeman—who lied before a congressional group only two years ago—to a top State Department post, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, along with the full Senate, seems fully inclined to routinely approve his nomination.

Federal Judge George Hart, in effect, forgave Kleindienst's lying because of what he called the “universal respect” for the former Attorney General. Shlaudeman's lack of truthfulness is apparently mitigated by “national security” considerations—which translate into covering up CIA operations.

Shlaudeman, a career Foreign Service Officer, had been the deputy chief of the American embassy in Santiago, Chile, from 1969 to 1973—the

Mr. Marks is co-author of “The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence” and co-editor of “The CIA File.”

very years when the U.S. government and, particularly, the CIA were first trying to stop Salvador Allende from becoming president and then making it impossible for him to govern.

On June 12, 1974, Shlaudeman told the House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Despite pressures to the contrary, the U.S. government adhered to a policy of non-intervention in Chile's internal affairs during the Allende period.”

At the time Shlaudeman made that statement, there had not yet been revelations in the press about the CIA's Chilean operations; nor had the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded that the U.S. “had moved finally to advocating and encouraging the overthrow of a democratically elected government.”

The Nixon administration obviously did not want the CIA's top-secret involvement to surface. Only a handful of officials, including Shlaudeman, knew that the agency had carried on, among other anti-Allende activities, a massive secret propaganda campaign, a “political action” program to break up the ruling Chilean coalition, and a covert offensive against the Chilean economy.

Shlaudeman, who if the Senate approves will become the State Department's top policy-maker for Latin America, claims he did not lie before Congress. He admits he “knew of” the propaganda pro-

gram against Allende and of the other CIA operations (except for the “Track 2” direct CIA attempt in 1970 to foment a military takeover, which was kept from all State officials at Nixon's orders).

Shlaudeman explained to the Foreign Relations Committee in May that the secret CIA payments of money to Chilean political parties and media “were in furtherance of their survival” and not designed to bring about Allende's overthrow.

That last statement may be true, but it still does not jibe with Shlaudeman's earlier testimony that the U.S. government stuck to a policy of non-intervention in Chile. Whether or not the CIA should have intervened is another matter, but there can be no question Shlaudeman did not tell Congress the truth about it.

If a foreign intelligence service, like the Soviet KGB, ever spent millions of dollars to attack President Ford in the American press or to secretly subsidize the Democratic Party, most people would accept that the Soviets had become involved in our domestic politics.

Shlaudeman himself showed he was sensitive to such actions by foreign powers when he told the Senate committee in May that he regarded Cuba's attempts to raise the Puerto Rican question at the United Nations as “interference in our internal affairs.”

Shlaudeman is only one of several high level government officials to have deceived Congress about Chile. As onetime CIA division chief and now syndicated columnist Tom Braden said last year about Richard Helms' testimony on the same subject, “Helms was going by the old CIA tradition, which is that, if necessary, the director will openly lie.”

Thus, it may seem unfair to single out Shlaudeman for punishment when the Justice Department has deferred for over a year a possible perjury indictment against Helms. However, neither Helms nor any of the other deceivers is currently seeking Senate approval to move into an important new job. And now that the Senate Intelligence Committee has officially confirmed the CIA's role in Chile, the Senate can no longer ignore the evidence against Shlaudeman.

At some point, the idea must be restored that individuals are accountable for their acts. At some point, the senators either have to declare that it is not permissible for officials to lie in their testimony or to accept that the congressional role of overseeing government activities is a sham.

If Shlaudeman is approved, the Senate will be sending a clear signal to the bureaucracy that lying before Congress is not only allowable but is not even a bar to promotion.

If Shlaudeman is voted down, however, it is just possible that the next time a congressional committee tries to find out what American policy is toward a particular country the official under questioning will at least refuse to lie, even if he does not want to tell the truth.