



## Don Oakley

*Post-1-31-77*

### 'Classified' stamp is frequently abused

There were enough doubts about Theodore Sorensen to have put his nomination by Jimmy Carter as head of the Central Intelligence Agency in some jeopardy in any case. But it was Sorensen's alleged misuse of classified White House documents that solidified opposition to him among members of the Senate Intelligence Committee and led to his withdrawal of his name.

When he left the White House in 1964, the former counsel to President John F. Kennedy took 67 cartons of White House papers with him, including seven classified for security reasons, to use in writing a book about the Kennedy administration. This Sorensen himself revealed in a sworn affidavit he made to assist the defense in the 1973 Pentagon Papers trial of Daniel Ellsberg, although as it turned out the affidavit was not needed.

There has never been any question about Sorensen's loyalty. Nor was legality of what he did, albeit one of those extremely murky areas, in issue. No one charged that his use of the materials injured the United States in any way.

Sorensen did "nothing wrong," said then Vice President-elect Walter Mondale, after the affidavit was unearthed and circulated among the Intelligence Committee. President-elect Carter also indicated that it was his understanding that Sorensen's treatment of the classified material was "common practice" in administrations of both parties.

At bottom, what bothered the senators was the question of Sorensen's fitness to direct an agency which is synonymous with secrecy and national security. And in this respect, it is not clear just how greatly the country's interests were served by his forced withdrawal.

What better person to oversee the operations of the CIA, which has been accused of all sorts of foul things, than a man who has publicly criticized some of its more reprehensible clandestine operations and stated that there is too much secrecy in government?

Yet at the same time, it is at least a little ironic that among the other doubts about Sorensen was his role in helping Sen. Edward Kennedy "explain" the Chappaquiddick incident. This would suggest that in Sorensen's view, too much secrecy is a bad thing

— except when it is not a bad thing.

On balance then, it is probably for the best that he did not force a showdown before the Intelligence Committee.

But we continue to be nagged by those few words of Jimmy Carter about the "common practice" of presidents and their aides.

Some things surely have to be kept secret and confidential in the White House. But the classified stamp is too frequently wielded not to protect the country from its enemies but to protect the administration from its critics, and the selective and calculated leaking of classified information is done less to inform the public, or because the president feels it is not safe to reveal the information, than to serve the purposes of the administration, whatever they may be.

Ditto every agency, bureau and department in the government, not excluding Congressional committees.

Which is one more reason to be thankful we live in a country which has periodic changes of administrations and turnovers in its legislative branch. One administration's coverup is the next administration's public knowledge — although not always, as witness Richard Nixon's frantic efforts to suppress the Pentagon Papers, which were an embarrassment to the Johnson administration, not his.

Even so, uncertain as it is, the people's exercise of their right to throw the rascals out at regular intervals remains their only real defense against excessive government secrecy.