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A Helter-Skelter System for

Cabinet hostility against Attorney General Edward H. Levi for lone-wolf decisions leading President Ford into dangerous curbs on the intelligence community peaked last month when Treasury Secretary William Simon accused him of impairing the President's protection in Puerto Rico.

That accusation is merely the most dramatic evidence of anti-Levi anger in the National Security Agency, CIA, FBI, Secret Service, Pentagon and Treasury. In the eyes of critics, Levi's most grievous sin was putting Mr. Ford on record in favor of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's bill to require approval from a federal judge to wiretap a foreign embassy. "He has crippled our intelligence effort," one high-ranking official told us.

Dr. Levi, former University of Chicago president and a distinguished legal scholar, obviously is moved more by constitutional safeguards than demands of national security. But instead of his concerns being tempered by op-

posing views of other officials directly concerned with national security, Levi's undiluted opinions have become administration policy.

That is in keeping with the strange system that has evolved during Gerald R. Ford's two-year presidency. While dismantling the dangerous centralization of the Nixon system (which ignored the cabinet), Mr. Ford nevertheless has not transformed the cabinet into a functioning body for policy-making. Rather, policy is made helter-skelter by individual cabinet members.

Backstage squabbling over Mr. Ford's visit to Puerto Rico June 27-28 stems directly from the Attorney General's personal policy-making. Secret Service plans for surveillance of extremist Puerto Rican nationalists were vetoed by Levi on grounds that U.S. citizens cannot be shadowed under the President's intelligence reorganization plan of last February. Surveillance was cancelled.

Simon, who as Secretary of the Treas-

Making Policy

ury has responsibility for the Secret Service, immediately sent off this tough letter to the President: The restrictions imposed by the Attorney General have impaired your protection by the Secret Service. Translated, that clearly meant: If the President gets shot, don't blame the Secret Service.

Actually, Levi gives Simon, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, CIA Director George Bush and other high officials headaches that transcend Secret Service protection. The President's February intelligence plan, drafted by Levi, imposes tight restrictions on the intelligence community—such as requiring a judge's approval for wiretapping a foreign embassy.

Even so, the intelligence community blanched when Levi, on behalf of the administration, endorsed Sen. Kennedy's bill to require the U.S. government to seek court permission for electronic snooping on embassies—an ugly but universally accepted way of diplomatic life. Levi's endorsement of the bill writ-

ten by the Senate's most famous Democratic critic of the administration transcended mere approval: "I want to say that it is my view that this bill is a significant, even an historic step. I believe it is important to the country, and I hope it will be enacted quickly."

Moreover, another part of the Levi-designed system is blamed by high officials for such wide distribution of sensitive material throughout the bureaucracy that secrets tend to be compromised. Without overt leaks, sensitive security facts so widely handled inevitably seep out. Rightly or wrongly, high officials have lost confidence in the ability of their government to keep its secrets.

Since Mr. Ford during 25 years in Congress was considered a hard-nosed champion of national security not at all obsessed by civil liberties, a question arises. Has he undergone metamorphosis at age 63? More likely, he probably has not focused on the intelligence problem posed by Levi.

Blame for that attaches not only to Mr. Ford but to his White House staff. Well-liked Philip Buchen, the president's avuncular legal counsel, is no counterweight to the Attorney General. "Whatever Levi says is okay with Phil Buchen," one subcabinet member told us. More to the point, there simply is no systematic way for the views of other cabinet members—pro or, as in this case, con—to make an impression on the Oval Office.

The result is a freelance system of solitary policy-making, by this or that cabinet member. At the Treasury, Simon sets rigorous conditions for New York City fiscal reform. At the State Department, Kissinger devises a liberalized policy for Southern Africa. At the Pentagon, Rumsfeld gets tough on negotiations with the Russians. And at the Justice Department, Levi writes rules for intelligence that might be more in keeping with Teddy Kennedy's administration than Jerry Ford's.