

WASHINGTON — Many conserva-

tives voted for Ronald Reagan to cut out the sleazy conflicts of interest of the Carter days, to guard against the power abuses of the 60's and early 70's, to give investors confidence that corporate bribery was not concealed in public statements, and to reverse the Big Government intrusion into private lives that began in the New Deal. Mr. Reagan has shown his first signs of failing on those four counts.

1) *Conflict of Interest.* Despite last year's revulsion at the just exhibited by Carter relatives and cronies for trading on the Presidential name, the incumbent President's son, Michael Reagan, saw nothing wrong with taking a job soon after the election selling missile parts to the Government. He reminded procurement officers, in solicitation letters, how "my father's leadership" was important to them.

The incredibly blind White House reaction was to deny any impropriety, to echo Jody Powell about family members having to make a living, and — belatedly — to assign a lawyer to advise family members how to stay clean. This left it to Mr. Reagan's resentful son to quote his father as suggesting he not write any more letters — as if the only lapse had been to put influence-peddling in writing. The Reagan White House problem is not "media hounding," but its own insensitively to the same appearance of blatant impropriety about which Reagan supporters joined the media in rightly hounding Carter.

ESSAY

Reagan's Wrong Moves

By William Safire

2) *Abuse of Power.* We have seen how Attorneys General — especially those who consider themselves supremely incorruptible — cannot be trusted to investigate vigorously accusations of wrongdoing by their bosses or colleagues.

William French Smith, the longtime Reagan personal lawyer who now serves as Attorney General, wants to gut that part of the Ethics in Government Act that requires the appointment of special prosecutors in charges against high Federal officials. He thinks the normal Justice Department criminal process is enough.

Certainly the act needs amending to raise the threshold from a misdemeanor to a felony charge, and to enable officials singled out by this act to be able to choose a Special Defender to help fight back without going broke.

But the principle embodied in the act is sound: no Administration should be the prosecutor in its own case. The natural instinct is to cover up; only the fact of, or threat of, independent prosecutors appointed by the court in-

dures influence-free investigation and prosecution.

3) *Bribery Overseas.* Bill Brock, the Reagan special trade representative, wants the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act relaxed to help U.S. businessmen compete in foreign markets. He suggests that the reporting by accountants to the Securities and Exchange Commission on this matter be narrowed, and that policing be left to the less experienced Justice Department.

Such amendments would have the effect of saying to business: Forget competition on the basis of price, product and service — compete instead on the size of payoffs to corrupt foreign princes or power brokers. That approach is bad business in the long run, and encourages businessmen to conceal payoffs in their reports to the S.E.C. and to stockholders. The only senator actively resisting this is William Proxmire, who is turning out to be the most principled conservative in the Senate.

4) *Snooping Into Private Lives.* The other day, I received a call from

the F.B.I., which was properly and routinely checking into the loyalty of Ambassador-designate Arthur Burns, an esteemed former colleague. At the end of my encomium, the agent said that under the Freedom of Information Act, my comments would be available to the person being checked; the agent asked if I wished to claim anonymity.

Civil liberties were not always so well protected. The Freedom of Information Act is a blessing for those who value a check on Government snooping. Individuals can now find out what the F.B.I. file says about them. Even better, individuals can force the Federal bureaucracy to disclose rulings made without public scrutiny, and documents more politically embarrassing than secret.

Mr. Reagan's Attorney General evidently finds the Freedom of Information Act an annoyance. He has reversed the policy supporting F.O.I.A. followed by Carter Attorney General Griffin Bell, and now the Justice Department intends to help bureaucrats who wish to hide their dealings from taxpayers. (Mr. Bell is looking better every day.)

Conservatives in office can persuade themselves that they are immune to conflicts and abuses, that being probriety is being pro-business and that stopping access to Government files is in the interests of efficiency. But in so doing, they betray some of the principles that persuaded many of the voters to put them in power.