

White House Mishandling Of Foreign Intelligence

No high American official looks good in the latest set of moves against Communist penetration. Secretary of State Kissinger has chosen the wrong time and the wrong place and the wrong way to resist penetration of Africa and Western Europe.

Senators and representatives have shown themselves to be as loose-lipped and opportunistic as their most savage critics alleged. But the true seat of the trouble lies in the White House where a major fiasco in the handling of the intelligence community has worked both to rattle the Secretary of State and make bold the most irresponsible elements of the Congress.

Take first Dr. Kissinger's role. He authorized a low level of covert military aid to a pro-Western faction in Angola last summer to please their friends in Zaire and to offset a similar effort made by the Russians on behalf of a pro-Soviet faction.

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But the picture changed utterly when Angola became independent on Nov. 11, and the Russians stepped up aid in a way that pushed their faction to the fore.

At that point Dr. Kissinger could have dropped the operation entirely, on the solid ground that nothing that happens in Angola now is going to be very lasting or damaging to American security. Instead he increased the program and tried to keep it clandestine. Inevitably word of the expanded operation leaked, and the United States was caught in the act. Not only caught, but in the company of the least popular country in Africa, the racist Union of South Africa.

The same kind of bad judgment suffuses the program for using secret funds to support anti-Communist parties in Italy. Presumably the operation was set in motion months ago when Dr. Kissinger was genuinely worried about growing

Communist strength all along the north shore of the Mediterranean. By the time the payoffs were authorized, in December, the general situation in Portugal and Spain and the relations between Moscow and the Communist parties of Western Europe had changed dramatically.

But Dr. Kissinger, much preoccupied elsewhere, did not turn off the operation. The director of the Central Intelligence

Agency, William Colby, notified the appropriate members of the Congress. Which brings us to the rôle of the senators and representatives.

A not small fraction of the Congress has seen opposition to all covert American operations abroad as a good way to make headlines. Hence the preposterous comparison that in Angola were the makings of another Vietnam.

For the same self-serving reasons, irresponsible members of the Congress leaked to the press word of the support being given to anti-Communist elements in Italy. Once again the United States was caught in the act.

Which brings us to the White House. The rôle of the intelligence community has been prime White House business since a year ago December when The New York Times first disclosed improper domestic activities by the CIA.

Ever since it has been clear that unless Mr. Ford preempted the issue by vigorous action, the Congress would make it a political football. Nevertheless Mr. Ford has consistently fumbled and bumbled.

He first set up under Vice President Rockefeller a commission which was poorly chosen—particularly because it lacked congressional representation and only half finished a study of assassination. The incomplete work of the Rockefeller committee was then turned over to a Senate committee, under Frank Church, which went ape on the assassination issue. Inevitably the House set up a competing committee.

To deal with the Congress on intelligence matters, the President established a White House committee under John Marsh, an old congressional buddy who has his heart in the legislature and his head in the executive branch. Mr. Ford left the CIA in the hands of William Colby, a dedicated supporter of the agency but penitent about its past. Between them Messrs. Colby and Marsh evolved a policy of reverse brinkmanship—first standing fast against disclosure, and then giving out a Niagara of information to the Congress.

As a result, those senators and representatives most eager to make cheap headlines on the intelligence issue found their appetites quickened. Dr. Kissinger became convinced the White House was out to get him on the issue of covert operations. Thus shaken, Dr. Kissinger resorted—this time unsuccessfully—to the old tactic of trying to equate a minor issue (Angola) with the major issue of detente and arms control.

The upshot is a genuine mess. It has become a real question whether the United States has not denied itself, for years to come, a major foreign policy option—the option of conducting operations below the level of all-out, open confrontation.