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Civil liberties pall at White House

WASHINGTON — (NEA) — Until recently the White House was unique among palaces. It was relaxed, open, accessible. People could wander in off the street to shake hands with the chief. During the Hoover administration a tourist popped in on the President at his dinner one evening. The mansion had a security force, but it also had a heart, and was known as the only official residence in the world where the head of state was not afraid of the people.

The change began during the tensions of the Depression era. And after the death of John Kennedy, the White House had become a fortress of fear and suspicion. Today it is protected by perhaps the most elaborate electronic security system in the world, guards whose orders are "shoot to kill," and an arsenal of terrible weapons which include a reported heat-seeking anti-aircraft missile.

Not only does the head of state no longer trust the people around his home, he does not, to a high degree, even tolerate them there. Tourists are allowed inside the gates, but merely in tightly controlled areas. Others breach the walls only at their peril; there was no official remorse for the man shot down recently on the White House lawn. Secret Service agents instead said that his sad death was "an ideal operation" insofar as security reaction was concerned.

So nervous have the sentries become, actually, that White House visitors no longer even have to break the rules to risk scorn or manhandling. One need be only suspected of being a potential rule

breaker. Cast in point is a Philadelphia taxi driver named Peter Heller, age 38. His harmless visit to the White House a year ago in June has since forced him to sue the government for false arrest.

Heller's ordeal, as he relates it, actually began in 1969 when he started writing letters of complaint to the president. His grievance, which continues to this hour, was that the nation's intelligence operatives were polluting the ideals of democracy and importing dirty tricks for use domestically. Often his letters have explained that he is not downgrading America, which he feels is a "wonderful country" but that unfortunately, it is being ill-served by its officers.

For all his writing, Heller has never received a reply. He has met a number of government people, from FBI agents to Secret Service grimsters, and has acquired the usual reputation in these circles as a fruit. But neither the president nor "so much as a low-ranking flunky" has bothered to acknowledge his petitioning.

Thus last summer while in Washington, Heller decided to deliver some of his letters personally. He checked in with the Secret Service, which told him to see agent Rick Nelson at the White House. Following directions, Heller went to the mansion gate where an agent named Gerald Gibson, not Rick Nelson, interviewed him. They talked for 30 minutes regarding letters and related matters.

During the conversation, Heller mentioned that his letter writing had

gotten him into a jam in the 1960s. He'd said some intemperate things in correspondence to corporate moguls who thereupon had him committed to a mental institution. But he said he was not crazy, just angry at careless government and big business.

For his honesty, Heller found himself in a jam again. Agent Gibson summoned the Washington police who arrested the visitor and transported him to a local looney hospital for a "mental review." The law says such actions can only be taken with citizens when they are dangerous to themselves or to others, but never mind the law where White House security is concerned. Heller spent 45 hours in confinement; his suit is now pending, asking \$150,000 in damages.

What happened to Pete Heller happens to some 300 other folks annually, according to S.S. reports. Such is the confinement rate at the local mental hospital, in fact, that one of its sections has become known as the "White House Ward." It may be that some detainees need examination. In general, however, one suspects the Secret Service reaction says more about its mental health than it does about that of its victims.