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'A Sad Commission'

Sad is what you have to feel about the blue ribbon panel established by President Ford to look into the latest charges against the CIA, for the right presidential commission offered a chance to restore morale to government and balance to public opinion.

But Mr. Ford has selected a group whose composition is wrong in age, experience and political bias. He has contrived to put together a commission lacking in both expertise and believability, and he has managed that considerable feat more by ineptitude than the dirty motive of wanting to protect the CIA.

A presidential commission was the right way to deal with the charge of domestic spying for one obvious reason. A public inured to official lying by Watergate and Vietnam had no confidence that the regular institutions of government could clean up the agency.

Once it was clear that a presidential commission was the right forum for dealing with the matter, certain basic rules of commissionship come into play. A cardinal rule is that the membership include some professional expertise in the subject under examination. Thus the violence commission included a police chief, and several judges and district attorneys.

Another rule is that the membership be broadly representative of the society as a whole, with special emphasis on groups with big stakes in the subject of controversy. In particular it has been considered good form to include respected legislators, the better to head off partisan inquiries by the Congress. Thus Sen. Roman Hruska (R-Neb.) represented the conservative outlook on the violence commission, while Sen. Edward Brooke (R-Mass)

was there to express the viewpoint of blacks and liberals.

In the case of the panel on the CIA, there were some special considerations. Important national secrets are at stake, and the stuff involved is a proven headline grabber. So there was reason to be specially concerned to have on the panel responsible persons able to keep secrets and respect lines of inquiry drawn by the President.

President Ford was apparently mesmerized by that consideration. The one thing that can be said for his eight-man panel is that its members are responsible persons who are not going to blow secret information.

But the other basic rules of commissionship are defied. The President moved so slowly in deciding to form the commission, that congressional committees got off the mark first. Finding that he was unable to head off all congressional investigations, Mr. Ford decided not to take any congressional figures at all. That virtually guarantees that whatever the commission does, the Congress will upstage and redo in a blaze of publicity.

Neither has any single member of the commission any experience of how intelligence is generated. In trying to penetrate a highly specialized and arcane way of life, full of persons trained to lie, the committee will be virtually helpless.

Finally, the commission is devoid of inner balance and gives specially short shrift to those who seem to have been victimized by the illegitimate activities of the CIA. There is not a single prominent opponent of the Vietnam war on the commission. Neither is there a person connected with

the press, which did so much, to free the issue.

To be sure, Erwin Griswold, the former Solicitor General and Dean of the Harvard Law School, has been worried about breaches of the Bill of Rights long before it became fashionable. But his courageous work on such matters as the Fifth Amendment is virtually unknown to people under 40 who are now forcing the pace on questions of individual rights. And that age factor tells strong against the whole commission which counts as its youngest member Lane Kirkland, the Secretary Treasured of the AFL-CIO, who is 52.

Indeed, for the group which is most suspicious of the CIA, the group which most needs to be persuaded of the integrity of the commission, its composition only confirms their most cynical beliefs. Chairman Nelson Rockefeller is known to them as an unregenerate cold warrior, and an ambitious pol who desperately wants to be President.

Ronald Reagan is known to them as an unregenerate right-winger with a contempt for dissidence and civil liberties who would also like to be President. The other members come across as Establishment fuddy-duddies, with a high pain threshold on questions of justice and morality.

It is difficult to see, in these conditions, how the commission can do any good at all. Because he moved too slowly, because he was out of touch with the full range of national opinion, and because he had only dim connections with the country's pool of talent, Mr. Ford has missed a precious opportunity to reduce the terrible doubts which continue to eat away at the nation.