



Assassination Plots

Joseph Kraft

THE SENATE investigation into CIA assassinations is running into the sands of confusion. That is the immediate meaning of the subpoena issued the other day for new access to President Nixon's tapes and papers.

The larger meaning is that even the most responsible authorities are unwilling to acknowledge that some issues are too delicate and complex for the rights and wrongs to be settled by mere investigation.

The starting point of the assassination muddle is President Ford. He made it known that the CIA had been involved in assassination plots against foreign leaders. He assigned investigation of the matter to the Rockefeller commission looking into domestic improprieties by the CIA. The implication was that the Rockefeller commission would get to the bottom of the assassination business.

In fact the commission went an inch deep, and then stopped for lack of time and staff. So Mr. Ford passed the issue to a select Senate committee headed by the Idaho Democrat Frank Church, which was looking into the appropriate organization of the intelligence community.

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THE COMMITTEE undertook a full-scale investigation. It even

went into one episode that was not an assassination attempt. That was the shooting of the Chilean chief of staff, General Rene Schneider, in 1970, as part of a bungled effort to stage a kidnaping that would provoke a military coup against the Allende regime.

In handling the investigation Church behaved with exemplary responsibility. His one impropriety was to say that the CIA had behaved as "a rogue elephant." What the Senator meant was that the committee inquiry did not find there was clear presidential responsibility for all the actions taken by the CIA in the assassination area.

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BUT EVEN Church could not admit that the bureaucratic interplay between a President and a secret intelligence agency was inevitably a matter of willful, knowing ambiguity — a transaction where neither party wanted to know too much of the other's actions. Rather than merely say that, he is bowing out by demanding, through subpoena of the White House, documents from the Nixon presidency which are relevant to the Schneider killing.

The upshot of the subpoena is to throw the hot potato back to the White House. Turnabout is fair play, and President Ford is only getting now what he asked for when he handed the committee the assignment in the first place.