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New Look for Intelligence Agencies

Joseph Kraft

THE REORGANIZATION of the intelligence community announced last week looks at first glance like a mere administrative tightening. The producers of the raw intelligence are simply being made more responsive to the needs of the consumers in the White House.

But the Nixon Administration is no more free than most of the itch to enforce conformity. Unless very carefully watched, the new set-up could be one more device for destroying independent centers of analysis and information inside government.

The reorganization has two main components. For one thing, Richard Helms, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has been given authority to coordinate his own budget with those of the intelligence units within the Defense and State Departments.

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SINCE HELMS as CIA director is a member of most of the high-level policy committees in government, he is alert to the intelligence needs of the President and his closest advisers. Presumably he will be able — perhaps with considerable saving of money — to make the work of such intelligence outfits as the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency more relevant to White House needs. His part of the reorganization seems relatively straightforward.

The second part of the reorganization involves what is called "net assessment." That is a fancy term for the answer to the question: How does the strategic balance

stand between Russia and the United States?

Under the Nixon Administration there has been no central responsibility for net assessment. The result has been a chaotic battle featuring many protagonists. In general Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, with the backing of his Director of Research John Foster and to the delight of congressional hawks, has tended to rate the Soviet threat very highly. The CIA, to the delight of congressional doves, has been more skeptical about the Communist menace.

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UNDER THE NEW reorganization, responsibility for making the net assessment will be vested in a group working under the head of the National Security Council staff, Dr. Henry Kissinger. The official immediately responsible for the net assessments will be Andrew Marshall, who now leaves the Rand Corporation where he has been serving as an analyst to take a place on the NSC staff.

Marshall is by all accounts an extremely good man—experienced, reliable and discriminating in judgment. Presumably he can do a serious job of pulling together the vast range of complicated data required for making the net assessment.

But it is a serious question whether that office should be performed in such close range to the White House. For the atmosphere in the White House is heavily political. There is no great disposition toward detached analysis, still less to hear news out of keeping with prejudices and commitments.