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No Place for Watchdogs

The case of A. Ernest Fitzgerald, the former Air Force Deputy Assistant Secretary who was dismissed three years ago after publicly criticizing cost overruns on Lockheed's C-52 military transport plane, has become entangled in a web of official double-talk and high-level obfuscation.

The hearings held by the Civil Service Commission to determine whether the dismissal represented punishment of a conscientious civil servant for doing his job too well had singularly little help from the Administration. President Nixon first told a questioner at his recent news conference that he had personally approved of Mr. Fitzgerald's dismissal; then a White House spokesman announced that the President had been mistaken and did not, in fact, recall ever having participated in the decision.

Air Force Secretary Robert C. Seamans Jr. has invoked executive privilege in refusing to say whether he abolished Mr. Fitzgerald's job as a result of orders or advice from the White House. All he would say on that score was that he had received "some advice" and that the President had been in error on four different comments about the case in his meeting with the press. To give the executive branch the "privilege" to withhold such information involves more than the protection of a Government official's job security.

Mr. Fitzgerald had called attention to more than \$1 billion in excessive costs to the Government—which means to the taxpayers. Although the facts of his charge were never disputed, Mr. Fitzgerald was rewarded for his candor by first being sent to inspect a bowling alley in Thailand and then dismissed, allegedly for economy reasons.

The saving of Mr. Fitzgerald's salary, if that reason for his dismissal were even credible, must be measured against the impact his departure undoubtedly had on other cost-efficiency experts. Closing one's eyes to military-industrial extravagance thenceforth was obviously the better part of valor.

The Fitzgerald case takes on added importance because it parallels the recent demotion of Gordon W. Rule, director of the Navy's procurement control, for publicly fixing the blame for multibillion-dollar cost overruns and the bailout of defense contractors. In each instance, conscientious watchdogs of governmental spending found themselves in trouble for trying to blow the whistle on extravagance. Such public service is apparently not appreciated, even in this period of loudly trumpeted Administrative rhetoric about the intensity of its fight against governmental waste.

When Mr. Fitzgerald's job was abolished in 1969, Secretary Seamans said: ". . . We have not found a suitable new position in which he could make a contribution." Until the veil of executive silence is lifted from this case, the strong suspicion will persist that there is to be no "suitable" place in Government for officials who consider it their job to expose waste and inefficiency.