

The Bleeding Stops

In ordering the Air Force to reinstate A. Ernest Fitzgerald to his post as Deputy for Management Systems, the Civil Service Commission has exonerated a public servant who placed the taxpayers' interests above bureaucratic "team spirit."

Although the examiner's judgment contains some ambiguities about the Pentagon's reasons for firing Mr. Fitzgerald in January, 1970, there remains little room for doubt that the cost analyst's disclosures of a \$2 billion overrun on the C-5A aircraft project was the real cause of the action against him. The fact that Mr. Fitzgerald's position turned out to have been the only one to be eliminated in an allegedly routine "reduction in force" surely justifies the examiner's conclusion that the firing had been "improper, inappropriate and contrary to the spirit, intent and letter of commission regulations."

The case is rendered particularly poignant at a time of close scrutiny of the Nixon Administration's manipulation of governmental power. It was at the White House that the underhanded decisions against Mr. Fitzgerald appear to have been hatched. A memorandum from Alexander P. Butterfield, then a Presidential aide, to H. R. Haldeman contained the assessment that "Fitzgerald is no doubt a top-notch cost expert but he must be given low marks in loyalty; and after all, loyalty is the name of the game."

Loyalty to what and to whom? Clearly, not to the interests of the American taxpayer. The team to which, in the apparent view of the Administration's coaches, a cost analyst owed allegiance was the official Pentagon family and their industrial friends. Indiscretion in telling outsiders, on Capitol Hill and elsewhere, about governmental waste marked Mr. Fitzgerald as "a basic no-good-nick" who had taken findings "far from normal channels"—channels which would undoubtedly have swallowed up his unwanted findings.

There is an oddly familiar sound in the original White House recommendation on how to deal with Mr. Fitzgerald. "We should let him bleed, for a while at least," the memorandum suggested, reminiscent of John Ehrlichman's game plan of letting another out-of-favor official "twist slowly, slowly in the wind."

Unless the Air Force persists in its irresponsible course by appealing the commission's ruling, Mr. Fitzgerald will at last have ceased to bleed. While the vindication of a wronged Government employe is, of course, an urgent matter of justice, an even more important aspect of the case is that it may lead to a redefinition of public service. The name of the game ought to be loyalty not to special interests, but to the faithful execution of governmental duties.