

Sen. Baker: Looking Ahead

The reason why the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) fears a conservative Republican, Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee, more than all its liberal critics in the Senate was revealed during a recent political trip by Baker to nurture his presidential ambitions.

One prominent Republican businessman, in private conversation with the senator, was given the distinct impression that Baker had information which, when released, would put the CIA in a very bad light and possibly link it to the Watergate scandal. The businessman, an unreconstructed Nixonite, took heart from the chat that perhaps Richard M. Nixon was the victim, not the corrupter, of the CIA, despite proof to the contrary provided by the White House tapes.

"I am carrying on no vendetta against the CIA," Baker told us. Nevertheless, as a member of the Senate committee investigating the CIA, he is following the same leads he pursued with conspicuous failure on the Senate Watergate Committee. Unable then to implicate the CIA in the Watergate scandal, Baker is trying again now with virtually unlimited access to the agency's documents.

Thus, Baker seems intent on using the current investigation for the self-vindication he apparently considers essential to his presidential ambitions. That is why the CIA's defenders in both the administration and the Senate regard him as far less judicious and far more ominous than Chairman Frank Church of Idaho and the other liberal Democrats on committee.

This is steeped in irony, considering

Baker's consistent hard line on foreign policy (including his present courageous support of aid to Vietnam). On the record, he supports the essentiality of the CIA, including its covert activities now under attack. In fact, he says he would have preferred a more discreet congressional watchdog committee to the present investigation.

Moreover, Howard Baker has been regarded as a figure of great ability and greater promise ever since he entered the Senate in 1967—up to a point. That point is raised by his fierce ambition and tendency toward overcleverness in dealing with sensitive political situations.

For example, while getting national exposure in the televised Watergate hearings as an even-handed investigator, Baker behind the scenes was President Nixon's de facto attorney. That may explain why his eyes visibly lighted up in August 1973 when the committee questioned CIA officials. By tying CIA to Watergate, he could simultaneously be the fearless investigator and loyal Nixon defender.

His investigation of the CIA soon consumed all the time of the Baker-controlled minority staff on the committee. Baker demanded—and was refused—all manner of CIA documents, chilling his relationship with CIA Director William Colby. The end product: a report, bitterly resented as unfair by the CIA, which insinuated much and proved nothing.

By hinting revelations that he could not produce, Baker seriously damaged his own credibility. He now concedes ex-

ring tactically in those hints, resulting in a nationally distributed political cartoon by Oliphant ridiculing Baker, the sting of which the Senator felt severely.

But Baker will not let the matter rest there. He insists that he ran out of time in his CIA investigation when the Watergate committee closed shop last year—a contention disputed by the committee's other members and staffers.

What's more, he still contends he is on no fishing expedition but has good reason—which he cannot divulge—to believe there is something unrevealed regarding CIA connections with Watergate. That line is so reminiscent of his I've-got-a-secret assertions of Watergate days that CIA defenders are naturally alarmed.

What worries them most is that Baker, bright and resourceful, is not merely seeking newspaper headlines but attempting to defend his own credibility and reputation. That defense becomes crucial to Baker's presidential hopes if he continues to privately hint to Republicans of CIA culpability in Nixon's fall.

Thus, Baker's present course contains the seeds of calamity for all concerned. With its hands full trying to cope with the leftish firebrands in the House investigation, the CIA dreads an implacable conservative Republican foe in the Senate. But Baker also could abort his own career and drastically reduce his prospects for leadership in the future if he persists down the dangerous path of self-vindication.