

The Fitzgerald Affair

The investigation into the dismissal three years ago of A. Ernest Fitzgerald from his post as Air Force Deputy Assistant Secretary calls for speedy resolution. Mr. Fitzgerald deserves public exoneration and reinstatement if he was fired for entirely political reasons, as the evidence strongly suggests. The American people have a right to demand that public servants who fight against waste of the taxpayers' money are rewarded rather than punished for their efforts.

The testimony by Clark R. Mollenhoff, a former aide to President Nixon, cuts sharply through the double-talk and obfuscation with which White House and Air Force spokesmen have muddied the case. Mr. Mollenhoff presented the Civil Service Commission not with vague recollections but with interoffice White House memoranda which strongly indicate that Mr. Fitzgerald was discharged for political reasons rather than on the ground of "economy."

If economies were involved in the matter, they were those Mr. Fitzgerald had in mind when he publicly criticized more than \$1 billion in cost overruns on Lockheed's C-52 military transport plane. If this was his offense, then the Air Force's subsequent claim that the real issue was the leaking of classified information raises an interesting question. Do the military believe that the protection of official extravagance, inefficiency and collusion with contractors is vital to national security? If that is the prevailing doctrine, then Congress and the American people might as well resign themselves to giving the Pentagon a blank check.

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Beyond the facts of Mr. Fitzgerald's stewardship, his case represents one more dismal chapter in the developing scandals of governmental deception. After the dismissal had been portrayed as an entirely internal Air Force matter, President Nixon told a press conference last January that he had been "totally aware" of the firing. One day later, Presidential Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler tossed the ball back to the Air Force by explaining that Mr. Nixon "misspoke himself" and that there was no record that the Fitzgerald matter had ever been brought to the President's attention.

This clarification may have been technically correct. Mr. Mollenhoff's documentation shows only that the case had been brought to the attention of such Presidential aides as H. R. Haldeman, Patrick J. Buchanan, John W. Dean 3d, Jeb S. Magruder and others. Thus, while the buck may in this instance have stopped just outside the President's office—Mr. Nixon's corrected recollection to the contrary notwithstanding—it would be difficult to maintain the nonpolitical nature of the cast of characters that Mr. Mollenhoff's exhibits demonstrate were involved.

It is particularly disconcerting that so many of the same members of that cast have played important roles in a succession of alarming episodes—from Watergate to I.T.T. to Fitzgerald. All of these episodes have in common the arrogant abuse of executive power, the aggrandizement of special interests and the deception of the American people.