

CIA Fears at the White House

Efforts to politically insulate President Ford from the spreading congressional investigations of the Central Intelligence Agency reached a ludicrous peak when Ambassador Richard Helms, former CIA director, was invited in for an Oval Office chat with Mr. Ford two weeks ago.

Without the President's knowledge, top White House aides quietly took Helms aside before he entered the Oval Office to warn him that the President was "the nation's highest law enforcement officer." Translated, that meant Helms should fully understand that anything he told the President about CIA activities during the time he ran the nation's intelligence operations could be used against him.

Conveyor of that incredible warning, White House aides have confirmed to us, was the President's chief counsel, Philip Buchen. But other senior presidential aides fully supported Buchen's position.

The reason goes to their fear that, in the wake of sensational Watergate exposures of cover-up by President Nixon, Mr. Ford could be vulnerable to charges that he learned about questionable intelligence activities and tried to conceal his knowledge—a new "cover-up."

Inside the CIA, the State Department and the Pentagon, the effort to insulate the President from the facts and to place him, in effect, in an adversary role to the CIA at this time of

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maximum political danger is viewed as an outrage.

At one point White House aides actually considered not allowing Helms to see the President at all on his return from his ambassadorial post in Iran to face confessional inquisitors. That extreme position did not carry, but the warning to Helms did.

The warning dramatizes the post-Watergate mood of fear and recrimination which many top officials feel is undermining the CIA and other intelligence-gathering organizations as the politicians run for cover. The fact is that the CIA, both during and before Helms' directorship, seldom if ever strayed from the secret policy and operational directives laid down right from the Oval Office.

When the story broke Wednesday morning that Richard M. Nixon is looking forward to getting back in politics, a Republican leader in one big Midwestern state received telephone calls from two substantial financial contributors who delivered identical messages: If Nixon is back in the picture, you can count me out.

"Furthermore, the party leader told us that any political activity by Nixon would mean 'a total dry-up of Republican party money overnight. It would be disastrous in my state.'"

Not only is that view widely shared in Republican circles, but Sen. Barry Goldwater is blamed for making the revelation to the press based on his luncheon visit with Nixon at San Clemente. One Southern Republican leader, a stalwart Nixon defender even at the worst of Watergate, feels Nixon as party spokesman "would be outrageous" and was not happy about Goldwater's statement. "Barry ought to have more sense than that," he said.

If such conservatives complain about his mere mention of a Nixon comeback, Goldwater's "thought" that the party would readmit Nixon to a position as prominent as party spokesman may be one of his all-time worst forecasts.

A delegation of leftish big-money men from California secretly visited Sen. Frank Church of Idaho at the

Capitol Tuesday to ask him to run for President and came away with a note that is being interpreted as, "no, not now, but come back later."

Several rich militant liberals, led by veteran anti-war activists Harold Wilens and Stanley Sheinbaum, have been conferring with possible presidential candidates (including Church) and came to the conclusion that Church ought to be the one. What's more, Church had seemed more than willing.

But besides meeting with the Wilens-Sheinbaum group Tuesday, Church that day was named chairman of the Senate CIA investigating committee. He could not mix that with presidential politics, he told his visitors.

The Wilens-Sheinbaum group left Church downcast and reported the news to a shrewd political operative on the party's left wing.

Don't be disheartened, he advised: Church will go a lot further politically investigating the CIA in Washington than holding press conferences in Durham, N.H. That could be important considering the inability so far of Rep. Morris Udall of Arizona and other liberals to fill the vacuum on the left.

Church does not close the door as to what he may do when the CIA investigation is completed late this year. "Hell go," predicts a fellow liberal senator. "I know that look in his eye."