

Ford creates citizens' panel to probe CIA

Examiner News Services

WASHINGTON — President Ford announced yesterday he is creating a "blue ribbon" citizens commission to examine charges the Central Intelligence Agency spied on Americans.

He also said the Justice Department already is investigating whether the CIA broke the law.

White House press secretary Ron Nessen said Ford will name five to seven persons to the commission. He said it would hand in its report in three months.

Nessen said the President has interviewed several prospective members but has made no appointments. He added that the commission members probably will be announced sometime this week.

The question of illegal CIA activities arose last month amid reports that the agency violated its charter by spying on U.S. citizens and by conducting such other illegal acts as burglaries.

The panel was the idea of Secretary of State Kissinger, who suggested it to Ford during Christmas week after reading a report on the issue by CIA Director William Colby.

"I have today established a commission to ascertain and evaluate any facts relating to activities conducted within the United States by the Central Intelligence Agency that give rise to questions as to whether the agency has exceeded its stat-

utory authority..." Ford said in a statement.

"It is essential that we meet our security requirements and at the same time avoid impairing our democratic institutions and fundamental freedoms."

Ford ordered the commission to report on the CIA matter by April 4. Nessen said the findings would be sent to Congress and he assumed would be made public.

Apparently not to be released will be the Colby report. Nessen added that neither would he disclose the questions that Ford has found unanswered by the report.

Ford said he has ordered what he called "this blue ribbon panel" to "determine whether existing safeguards are adequate to preclude agency activities that might go beyond (the CIA's) authority and to make appropriate recommendations."

The President said the Justice Department already is "looking into such aspects of the matter as are within its jurisdiction."

Nessen said the Justice Department investigation has been under way "for the past few days." Ford, in an

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executive order setting up the commission, ordered all federal departments and agencies to cooperate.

Nessen said Ford "welcomes" any independent investigation of the CIA case that Congress wishes to launch. There have been several congressional calls in recent days for tighter supervision of the agency by Congress and for a Watergate-type special prosecutor to investigate the alleged illegal spying.

A Justice Department spokesman, Robert Havel, said he could not go beyond the President's disclosure

except to say: "We will assume our responsibilities on what is assigned to us. Whatever manpower it takes we will, I suppose, employ it."

The department's inquiry, however, was believed centered in the Criminal division of the Justice Department and in the Civil Rights division. The department did not say so, but investigations by those divisions could look into illegal surveillance, wiretapping, invasion of privacy and similar violations of rights.

Nessen told reporters, "It's fair to say that from

his (Ford's) reading of Colby's report and talking with Kissinger and (Defense Secretary James) Schlesinger and Colby that enough questions were raised for a citizens commission to look into this matter."

In addition to the half-dozen or so panel members, none of which will come from the government or Congress, the commission will have an executive director to conduct the details of the inquiry.

According to Nessen, the panel will not have subpoena powers. He explained that

authority should be unnecessary since the documents required already are in government hands and most of the potential witnesses are federal employees.

If any witnesses refuse to testify the President may ask Congress for subpoena powers, the White House spokesman said.

The White House announced Ford's action three hours after the President spent 20 minutes in his Oval Office in a private meeting requested by former CIA Director Richard Helms.

Helms, who arrived in

Washington Friday night on leave from his post as ambassador to Iran, served as CIA director from 1966 until late 1972 — a period embracing some of the Johnson administration and most of the Nixon years.

It was during that period, according to newspaper and congressional charges, that the agency spied illegally on thousands of U.S. Citizens.

Helms has categorically denied accusations the CIA conducted illegal surveillance of antiwar activists, dissidents and other Americans while he was director.