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The Right Focus on the C.I.A.

IN THE NATION

By Tom Wicker

Official documents just published by the State Department disclose that in 1948, President Harry Truman—then facing dim re-election prospects himself—approved a secret recommendation that the United States “make full use of its political, economic and, if necessary, military power” to prevent a Communist election victory in Italy.

Published records do not as yet detail to what extent that recommendation was carried out, or what role might have been played by the fledgling Central Intelligence Agency. But Mr. Truman’s order of a quarter-century ago finds an unpleasant echo in the word Richard Helms, the director of the C.I.A. in 1970, says was passed to him that year by the Nixon Administration—that the overthrow of the Government of Salvador Allende Gossens in Chile was “a thing that they were interested in having done.”

Mr. Allende, a Marxist, already had been elected, although not by a majority, and was awaiting confirmation by the Chilean Congress, so in that respect the Nixon policy was far more drastic than Mr. Truman’s. The latter President, moreover, might reasonably be considered to have had more justification, in the era of Stalin, for his concern about Italy than Mr. Nixon had, in the era of détente, for his opposition to Mr. Allende.

The net effect, in both cases, still was official Government sanction for United States intervention in the internal affairs of another nation, to be undertaken clandestinely and for the purpose of containing or rolling back Communism. And however different the circumstances in which the two interventions were approved, they underscore the enormous difficulties of the task now being undertaken by the special Senate committee appointed to investigate the operations of the American intelligence community.

The Truman documents show that the seeds of the investigation lie deep

in the origins of the Cold War. But in the mere eight months allotted to its operations, the Senate committee cannot possibly rummage back through the history of the past thirty years to examine every covert operation undertaken abroad—even if the records were clear and easily obtained, which they aren’t, and even if circumstances had not so greatly changed. It would be difficult even to cover such ground back to, say, 1960; and the task is made infinitely more complicated because the committee also is investigating the F.B.I. and numerous other Federal agencies concerned with intelligence (Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee says there are nineteen such agencies altogether).

The committee is charged with looking into the operations of these agencies at home and abroad, but the concerns that led most directly to its establishment were domestic—disclosures that the C.I.A., in apparent violation of its charter, had been conducting surveillances of, and keeping records on, American citizens. It would be natural, therefore, if the committee were to place its major emphasis on uncovering and preventing unlawful activities threatening the rights of American citizens, rather than in investigating covert operations abroad; the latter, in any case, present delicate problems of international relations that the committee will be reluctant to raise.

Statements by Senator Frank Church, the chairman, and Senator John Tower, the senior minority member, suggest that the committee will place its major focus on domestic violations.

It can hardly be argued that that is not a vital subject of investigation; and, in the case of the F.B.I., the primary one. Senator Church, moreover, is privately determined to examine the record of covert operations abroad in sufficient depth to develop guidelines and policies to control them in the future.

Still, the danger seems clear that in demanding so much of this single committee in so short a time, and even with the best efforts of its members and staff, the Senate may get far less than it or the nation expects. The question of domestic violations of law by the C.I.A. is already being studied, for example, by President Ford’s so-called “blue ribbon” commission under Vice President Rockefeller; and while the makeup of that panel does not inspire confidence that it will conduct a searching inquiry, over-concentration on the same area by the Senate committee is bound to cause much duplication of effort.

Yet, the wording of the Rockefeller commission’s charter so tightly limits it to investigating C.I.A. domestic operations as to foster the belief that the Administration has good reason to fear any probing by the commission of the C.I.A.’s covert operations abroad. Indications mount that those operations—as in Chile—have been extensive and unsavory, to a degree undreamed of by most Americans.

The record of these operations should be subjected at last to the most searching scrutiny—not that the past can be redeemed but that the future may be guarded. If Senator Church and his committee find themselves unable to single out covert operations to the extent necessary, they should have no hesitation in recommending further investigation, and for as long as it may take, of this dark chapter in American history.