

NYTimes

JUN 20 1975

Playing With Secrecy

By Tom Wicker

WASHINGTON, June 19—It's hard to believe that Director William E. Colby of the Central Intelligence Agency could have been serious when he suggested in testimony prepared for a House subcommittee that the record of C.I.A. involvement in assassination plots should not be made public. Exposure of such delicate matters could do the United States no good, Mr. Colby said, and anyway the C.I.A. now has rules against assassinating or helping to assassinate people, or even suggesting to underworld thugs that they should make a patriotic hit for Uncle Sam.

In their arrogance, Government officials can never seem to learn that due to so many abuses of their legal powers, and to so many lies and misrepresentations to the public, nobody trusts them to obey even their own rules, let alone fess up to violations. They have to be watched and restrained, not trusted, and Senator Frank Church was quite right in his response to Mr. Colby's latest audacity.

"The past is very much at issue here," Mr. Church said. "We need to know what went on and the degree to which assassination was an instrument of foreign policy. We need to know because we want to find remedies that will prevent this from happening again."

Such remedies could hardly be found or understood if the C.I.A.'s record of involvement in assassination plots were to be closely held by a few members of Congress and a few Administration officials. The public needs to know, too, and not least because if anyone has committed criminally liable acts, no matter under whose authority or for what "national security" purposes, such persons ought to be prosecuted, not protected, by a Government supposedly of laws.

It may be, nevertheless, that in the sudden, seemingly exclusive focus of Congressional investigating committees on the question of assassination—as a result of President Ford and Vice President Rockefeller having so publicly and piously passed this sensational buck to Capitol Hill—that other and perhaps more important issues will not be sufficiently examined.

Too much concentration on the matter of assassination might not only consume the investigative staff's time and efforts; but if a reasonably clean bill of health on that subject were ultimately given to the C.I.A., it might then appear to the public that the most serious charges had been dismissed and there was nothing much to worry about.

Actually, failed attempts on the life of Fidel Castro—or even successful efforts to eliminate other leaders—

reprehensible as they are, should not obscure investigation of, say, the role of the C.I.A. in the destruction of the legitimate Allende Government in Chile, or in the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia and the terrible warfare that ended in the physical destruction and political brutalization of that once-peaceful country.

Assassination may well be no more than the tip of a vast iceberg of violence and conspiracy and international thuggery too long concealed from an American people in whose name the C.I.A. has been given license to operate. The Chicago Daily News has just reported, for example, that in 1974 the C.I.A. talked the Department of Justice into dropping an indictment against a C.I.A. agent charged with helping to smuggle 100 pounds of raw opium into the United States.

The Chicago Daily News said that the C.I.A., to advance its political links in Southeast Asia, where the opium was grown, allowed its agent, a Thai, to help bring it into this country in two separate shipments. The second was intercepted and the agent was indicted, but The Daily News said the C.I.A. got the charge dropped on grounds that "the situation could prove embarrassing" to the agency. Embarrassing indeed, since somebody

IN THE NATION

other than that agent ought to be indicted and tried for any such deliberate decision to contribute to the heroin epidemic in this country.

That kind of thing, as much as any assassination charge, needs to be thoroughly examined, thoroughly aired, and the real decision that hangs upon such an inquiry is not the mere fixing of past responsibility, important as that is, but the hard determination whether a vast secret agency can ever be trusted by a democracy to operate within its own or anyone's rules.

The Murphy Commission, appointed in 1972 by Richard Nixon to study American foreign policy operations, is reported to have asserted in a draft report that executive branch controls over C.I.A. covert operations have "become quite informal" in recent years; and sometimes have been bypassed altogether. That suggests one major problem with a secret agency designed to protect "national security"—those who are supposed to control frequently find it convenient to look the other way, or themselves push for lawless acts that can be kept secret.

The other problem is that an agency that can act in secret also can conceal its acts or disguise their nature from those supposedly in control. And those who connive at secrecy all too often become its victims.