

The Light And The Dark

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 26—To give thanks in adversity may seem strange, but there has been truth in the paradox since the first Thanksgiving. This year we celebrate just after learning terrible things about ourselves as a country. But there is reason for thanks even in the pain of discovering that our Government has from time to time made a policy of assassination.

In other countries—in many—such news would arouse not much more than a shrug. That it still shocks us is a sign that idealism persists after all the hard knocks of recent years. Indeed, Americans are more sensitive to the claims of law and humanity now than they were a few years ago, before Vietnam and Watergate.

And of course there is strength in the telling of the assassination story. As Senator Robert Morgan of North Carolina put it, we should be proud of our ability to "reveal and discuss improper, unpopular governmental actions" and should see in it hope for "the continued existence of our free society."

Yes, but the truth was almost not told. The Senate Intelligence Committee had to get past the most strenuous objections to publish its assassination report. President Ford said publication would "do grievous damage to our country" and "seriously impair our ability to exercise a positive leading role in world affairs."

If there is any one lesson in the horrors of recent years, one might think, it is the danger of secrecy. The commitment to war in Indochina grew in secrecy, as did the terrible means by which the war was waged. The whole catalog of abuses called Watergate depended on secrecy. So did the perversion of intelligence agencies, foreign and domestic.

But the demand for secrecy goes on, despite the evidence of disasters it

ABROAD AT HOME

has bred. In a sense that is not surprising. Secrecy is power—for the few who know the secrets. They will naturally struggle to suppress information. But the phenomenon is broader than that, and more dangerous.

Consider the House Intelligence Committee's attempt to get certain material from Secretary of State Kissinger. Its most important subpoena was for past State Department recommendations, from 1961 to 1974, for covert operations abroad. President Ford invoked executive privilege on that, Kissinger rejected the subpoena and the committee voted to cite him for contempt.

The State Department treated the committee action as *lèse-majesté*. To do that to Kissinger was "unbelievable," an assistant said, "on the eve of an important summit meeting, two weeks before a Presidential visit to China and less than a month before a major NATO meeting." Somehow one doubts that the Secretary would find any other time more convenient for a test of the legal issues.

But the executive branch can always be expected to defend its power with warnings about the national security. The depressing aspect of this case has been the lack of understanding elsewhere, much less support for the House committee and its chairman, Otis Pike. It is as if, after all that has happened, the old unthinking worship of Presidents went on undimmed.

An amazing example came from The Washington Post—amazing because The Post fought the Presidential mystique so bravely in Watergate. A Post editorial on the Pike-Kissinger dispute said the House committee had behaved with "abandon" and "forced an unnecessary and unwise confrontation." Executive privilege must be maintained here, the editorial said, to protect "the confidentiality of the Presidential decision-making process and conduct of the nation's foreign policy."

The Post was evidently wrong about who sought the confrontation. The White House handled the Pike committee brusquely, for reasons that are now plain: Ford and Kissinger were shifting to a policy of total non-cooperation with the Congressional intelligence inquiries.

On the merit, could any serious investigation of U.S. intelligence fail to examine what sort of proposals for covert action were made in the past, and how they were considered? As for protecting "Presidential decision-making," the assassination study showed that a grave weakness in the handling of covert activities has been absence of clear Presidential control.

By the standards of that editorial, President Ford's argument against the assassination report would have been right. For that matter, Richard Nixon should have stood on executive privilege and kept the record of the "plumbers" concealed. Trying to understand The Post's inconsistency, one can only conclude that Henry Kissinger operates much more effectively among the Washington press than either of his Presidents.

The main reform now likely to emerge from the intelligence investigations is a permanent Congressional oversight committee. But without access to the facts such a committee would be a bad joke. We might as well find out now, in a test of the Pike subpoena or one from the Senate committee, if Congress has the will to play its constitutional role in defining and controlling intelligence activities.