

See also article by
Dick Clark,
"Frustration,"
this file, same date.

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In
Pursuit
Of Folly

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, Jan. 28—In recent weeks the Ford Administration has been arguing, in all possible forums, that a President must have broad discretion to use the Central Intelligence Agency for covert operations. It has argued with particular emphasis that the operations must be kept secret.

Thus officials have objected to the current legal requirement that Congressional committees be advised of covert actions. If Congress must be told, they urge, information should go only to a small number of members who will not pass it on. They have proposed tough new penalties for leaks.

If there were such a system of Presidential discretion with assured secrecy, how would it work? As it happens, we do not have to speculate. An example is at hand: the program pushed by Secretary of State Kissinger and approved by the President to have the C.I.A. funnel arms and money to one side in the Angolan conflict.

The House of Representatives has just joined the Senate in voting to ban covert aid to Angola. It did so despite a letter from Mr. Ford warning—in language reminiscent of Henny Penny—that a ban would throw doubt on American "resolve" everywhere. The House vote was overwhelming, 323 to 99. A majority of Republicans even voted for the ban.

That lopsided result makes manifest the weakness, indeed absurdity, of the

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case for covert American intervention in Angola. But if the Administration had its way about the rules, there would have been no such result. There would have been no vote, and no debate, because the adventure in Angola would have been a secret.

It is fun to denounce leaks, and often politically useful. President Nixon and his lawyers used to deplore leaks when they wanted to distract attention from what had been disclosed—his abuses. Similarly now the White House and the C.I.A.'s ex-director, Mr. Colby, found it easier to attack the leaking of the House Intelligence Committee report than to deal meaningfully with its findings.

Of course there can be irresponsible

leaks, and unlawful ones. But in our system disclosure can also be the last resort against abuse of power. Secrecy insulates authority. Americans should never forget that officials who demand secrecy are also asking for a form of unaccountable power.

The Angolan operation shows the danger of secrecy. It was not a covert action of the traditional, limited kind; it was a large new departure in American foreign policy. Why, then, was it undertaken in secret? A former C.I.A. official, Harry Rositzke, answered that question recently in *The Washington Post*. He wrote:

"The President and the Secretary of State were concerned that the Congress would not agree with their Angolan policy and would not supply the required funds. Secret funds provided the easy way out. The use of covert action, not to achieve a foreign purpose in secret but to evade Congressional scrutiny, degrades the covert instrument into a domestic political tool."

That cautionary comment from an intelligence veteran leads to a puzzled question: Why should the present officials of the C.I.A. want it to be judged by such political enterprises as the Angolan caper? Why did Mr. Colby, as he left office, seek to tie the agency to the very forces in Government that have misused it and damaged its reputation?

The use of an intelligence agency as a secret arm of executive power, avoiding proper political control, must put the integrity and honor of the agency at risk. That is the lesson of the Bay of Pigs, Chile, Laos, the tragic arming and then abandoning of the Kurds.

The C.I.A. has itself sometimes opposed these misadventures, for example the Kurdish intervention. And intelligence specialists surely see the risk to their function if the agency gets involved in large-scale war operations. How can it be expected to provide dispassionate intelligence on a situation like that in Angola when it is committed to one side? (One's guess is that U.S. estimates of factional strength in Angola have in fact been way off.)

The intelligence community may be getting that message, Mr. Colby notwithstanding. The Association of Retired Intelligence Officers has just taken a poll of its members, and 56 percent of those responding thought that Congress should be told before covert operations were undertaken. Respect for our constitutional system of political accountability can only help the true intelligence function.

Congressional oversight is no amulet; it would not prevent every abuse. We also need a statute confining the C.I.A. to intelligence functions except possibly for limited covert action in situations posing grave risks to the national security. But Congress can show that it has learned from recent history if it now takes on the responsibility of meaningful intelligence oversight, without disabling itself by secrecy.