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Farce Or Tragedy

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON—When the House of Representatives voted the other night to have its committee's report on executive branch intelligence abuses censored by the Executive, I was reminded of a mocking English verse about journalists. Suitably adapted, it would go like this:

You cannot ever hope or plan
To bribe a U.S. Congressman.
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.

Cynicism is a natural reaction to that vote. After all the Executive cover-ups in recent years, after all the invocations of "national security" to conceal crimes and blunders, after all the talk of a bold new Congress, here was the House lying down and rolling over for the Executive in the name of security.

But it is too serious a matter for mockery. The episode suggests that, by waving the flag, the Ford Administration may be able to prevent meaningful reform of our intelligence services and the way they are controlled. There must be new doubts, too, about reliance on Congress to guard against abuses. And so it is important to try to understand what happened.

The House committee and its chairman, Otis Pike, bear some of the blame for their own undoing. The committee had to fight the White House to get information, and it deserved credit for its struggle. But it was short on constancy and on the political skill needed

ABROAD AT HOME

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to hold public support in the face of Presidential opposition. A disastrous week of leaks from its report increased an impression of unreliability.

There was a more basic reason for the House vote, however, than the committee's performance. That was a backlash—a public backlash—against continuing exposure of secret operations. The members were hearing from back home that people were reluctant to hear about any more embarrassments on the American record.

The Administration played shrewdly on that patriotic feeling. It dramatized the murder of the C.I.A. station chief in Athens, Richard S. Welch; many of the House debaters mentioned the Welch killing, although the proposed report contained nothing that could have put individuals at risk. President Ford's assistant, Jack Marsh, who lobbied hard against the Pike reports, said happily afterward: "Those guys were voting their districts."

For a member to stand up to that kind of emotion requires the courage of conscience, and there are not all that many Edmund Burkes in the House. But it would have been possible to take the public feeling into account without doing so much damage to the role of Congress in our system of balanced governmental powers.

If the concern was about disclosure of particular intelligence sources or methods, for example, the critics of the Pike committee could have framed a resolution directing it to remove any such matters from the report. Or the House could have had a group of its own elders referee the disagreements between the C.I.A. and the committee about what to publish.

Instead, the resolution adopted gave the last word to the executive branch. It said the report should not be released unless the President first certified it "as not containing information which would adversely affect... intelligence activities." That is a sweeping grant of the power to censor, not even limited to secret or top-secret matter. A critical comment on C.I.A. mistakes could "adversely affect" it.

Under such a deferential rule, a President could censor the fact that \$800,000 was paid to a rightist Italian general against C.I.A. advice—as the Pike report is said to disclose. A President could censor the facts about his own or his predecessor's attempts to misuse the C.I.A. for domestic political purposes.

In short, the House resolution sets a precedent for giving the Executive Branch carte blanche to cover up its own abuses. Has Congress forgotten Watergate so soon? Has it forgotten that exercise of its own power is the Constitutional answer to the imperial Presidency?

The House really expressed a lack of confidence in itself in that vote. It told us that it was afraid to exercise its function of oversight in this crucial area because it might make a mistake—and be blamed. It told us that it was afraid of responsibility.

In our system of divided government, knowledge is power. One member said in the debate that a committee should not "release information unilaterally"—as if information belonged only to the Executive. A member of the first House of Representatives, James Madison, warned that a democratic system "without information" would lead to "a farce or a tragedy." He said: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."