

Waiting For The Girls

By Russell Baker

When I regularly attended burlesque there was always one comedian equipped with what was called a "bladder." This was a balloon-like, air-filled bag—it may even have been a bladder, for all I know—which he employed to hit straight men, candy-and-postcard vendors and the clumsier chorines whenever the show threatened to lag. He invariably wore grotesque baggy trousers from which the "bladder" would be produced with extravagant flourishes, and the house would break up, or yawn, according to his skills, as he swatted it against skulls, hips and abdomens.

It worked comically as an absurdist distraction from more ponderous business, much as Harpo Marx's honking a klaxon at the Metropolitan Opera worked to relieve his audience's suffering during an M-G-M production of "Il Trovatore." I am often reminded of Harpo and the burlesque bladder-wielders when I wonder why we enjoy so much bad government.

One reason, I suspect, is that the people who are compelled to champion bad government intuitively think of the public as a kind of burlesque audience, and not without cause. We seem to become bored quickly with ponderous business and to need frequent changes of subject to keep us from stumbling over our low boredom thresholds into slumber.

At these points various government folk step into the act, break it up by hitting somebody with a bladder and turn our attention elsewhere. This has become a fairly standard routine for fending off attempts to create better government, and we now see it being used again to prevent the C.I.A. from being subjected to improvement.

The bladder in this act is the so-called "news leak." In a good, big-league news leak, evidence pointing to incompetent or depraved government is made public, thereby threatening to create a demand for correction. This is a dangerous moment for the people who, for many reasons, some of them possibly honorable, feel obliged to preserve bad government.

They spring onstage with flailing

bladders. "Change-of-subject time, folks!" Whop! Whop! "Something has to be done about these terrible leaks!" Whop! "All right, you reporters, off to the slammer!" Whop! Whop! "It's criminal, folks! Criminal the way these leaks endanger the national security of bad government!" Whop!

The evidence of incompetence and occasional depravity in the C.I.A. appeared in a leak more than a year ago. It forced the Government to set up a Presidential commission and two special Congressional committees to consider ways of tightening the ship.

Each of these groups produced more leaks pointing to such garish examples of incompetence, waste and felony that, as the months passed, we began to become jaded by the lushness of the tale and, with our low boredom thresholds, to yearn for distractions, for someone to stride in with a bladder and change the subject.

By early January, Congress's concern for making the C.I.A. work better was visibly waning, partly because the White House, the State Department and the C.I.A., with their bureaucratic and political obligations to forestall better government at C.I.A., had persuaded many of us that the "leaks" were worse than the incompetence, waste and felony, and partly perhaps because in our boredom we wanted a change of subject.

In what looks suspiciously like the end, Congress itself has wielded the bladder with a comic stroke of genius. Congress has acted at last. And how? By putting Daniel Schorr out of business for leaking a Congressional document, whose contents had been published in paraphrase weeks ago.

Schorr is a reporter for CBS, which has acquiesced in the burlesque by relieving him of his reporting job. And to cap the comedy, Ford has proposed a reform of C.I.A. which will permit it to continue along its old way while making it far harder for us to find out if it continues to be as incompetent and felonious as ever.

As burlesque it is delicious. Having obtained evidence that C.I.A. gave us government that engaged in waste, burglary, felonious eavesdropping, bribery of foreign politicians, interference in domestic politics, the overthrow of foreign governments, perjury and murder, Congress swings into action and hands us the head of Daniel Schorr.

Are we all to blame for this? Surely our low national boredom threshold and our hunger for fresh distractions and new villains make us easy marks for these bladder flappers. And now there is a new group on the horizon.

In the Reagan-Wallace-Carter attack on Washington as the cause of all the bad government we have been enjoying lately, we are not only distracted from boring problems, like why the C.I.A. can't be made better, but we are also being flattered by their assurance that none of the responsibility for bad government is ours.

"Vote against Washington!" Whop! "And see government turn over a new leaf!" Whop! Whop! Peanuts! Postcards! Gift boxes! Each one with a surprise mystery photo straight from Paris!