

Washington: The C.I.A. and the Unanswered Question

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21—After all the mysterious disclosures about the Central Intelligence Agency's secret operations among the students and foundations of America, one mystery remains: Why did all the intelligent people around the President not intervene to change the policy before it became a public scandal?

Almost all of them are now saying the policy was obsolete if not wrong. The President has stopped it. The Vice President has criticized it publicly. The Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, John Gardner, has condemned the C.I.A., directed by his friend, Richard Helms, for carrying it on. Bobby Kennedy, who presided over it when he was Attorney General, has sniped at it and at the President in private. The Under Secretary of State, Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Gardner, and Helms are now heading a Johnson committee to transform the whole system, and all this raises a fundamental question.

Why, if they all agree now it is wrong, did they not put that question to the President before? Why, if they condemn the press for "embarrassing" the President

and his Administration now, did they not protect him earlier from a system they now concede should have been changed long ago?

The Future Problem

So much has been written about this in the last week that everybody here is bored with it, and the Administration is so vulnerable to criticism that it is almost embarrassing to continue the controversy. But looking to the future, there is still a fundamental and unresolved problem. The machinery of the Government for reviewing policies which become obsolete with the passage of time is obviously defective. The officials now dealing with the controversy concede the point, and they are trying to deal with the limited question of the C.I.A. and the students, but they are still not really dealing with the larger question of policy-making that produced the C.I.A. controversy in the first place. That question is how can the Government keep policies up to date?

The interesting thing about this is that the Administration had various committees to perform precisely the function of answering these questions in relation to the C.I.A. Bobby Kennedy headed one to review the

C.I.A.'s activities after the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. The Secretary of State was given the task at that time of supervising the C.I.A.'s activities overseas. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia was assigned the job of watching the C.I.A. for the Congress. And the President's personal friend, Clark Clifford, was asked to preside over an outside committee to watch the intelligence activities of the Government.

Apparently none of these committees, however, either knew anything about what the C.I.A. was doing with its secret funds for students, labor unions, magazines, and radio stations such as Radio Free Europe, or they approved what President Johnson's own closest associates now criticize.

The Administration, under both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, had an interdepartmental committee to deal with the intelligence activities of the Johnson, now U.S. Ambassador to Japan, and Cyrus Vance, Under Secretary of Defense, worked with Richard Helms, head of the C.I.A., on this problem.

Under President Johnson now, Walt Rostow of the White House staff, Vance of the Pentagon, Foy Kohler, former U.S.

Ambassador in Moscow, and Helms still meet regularly to supervise intelligence problems, but none of these committees of extraordinarily able men apparently felt that the secret financing of students, labor unions, magazines, or radio stations was a major political issue.

Something Is Wrong

Even the Johnson intimates in the Government concede that something is wrong here. They are irritated with the press for exposing the facts. They concede the C.I.A. policy toward the students should be changed. But they have still not dealt with the major problem, which is that the Administration's machinery for reviewing policy is defective; that the Cabinet and the National Security Council are not operating to check over all policy, and that the State Department still does not really know what the C.I.A. is doing.

This is the issue that is troubling Washington now. It is really the same issue that has been bothering the capital about Vietnam—a tendency to drift into unintended situations; a failure of the machinery of government to review old policies until it is too late.