

APR 16 1970

The Privacy of Tax Returns

The millions of Americans whose income tax returns have been flooding into the Internal Revenue Service this week have been assured over the years that the Government will respect the confidentiality of those returns.

That confidence is being undermined by the disclosure that Clark R. Mollenhoff, special counsel to President Nixon, has authority to see any tax return on the basis of his own written statement to the I.R.S. that he has a "need to know" the information contained in the return. Mr. Mollenhoff's precise assignment at the White House never has been made very clear; but it appears that the Mollenhoff mission is to function as the President's private eye, sniffing out governmental scandals before they become a public embarrassment.

Freedom to a member of the White House staff to inspect tax returns is bad enough in any case, but the partisan flavor of the few public statements Mr. Mollenhoff has made since entering the Administration only makes it worse—and even less excusable. Mr. Mollenhoff himself hints strongly that he is looking into the accounts of men prominent in Democratic politics under the Johnson or Kennedy Administration.

No matter who is hurt or helped by such inquiries and no matter who conducts them, the politicization of income tax records is a shocking abuse of governmental power. President Nixon should act swiftly to end any appearance that he sanctions such abuse.