

A Cover-UP Trend in The Administration



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THE WATERGATE cover-up apparently has become the style throughout the Nixon Administration. Government auditors have been encountering "increasing difficulties" in gaining access to records of fraud, waste and mismanagement.

This is the report we get from inside the General Accounting Office, which is the investigative arm of Congress. Under the law, the GAO has a legal right "to examine any books, documents, papers, or records of any . . . department."

Yet obstacles have been raised, in apparent violation of this law to hamstring GAO investigators. Comptroller General Elmer Staats confirmed to my associate Joseph Spear that his auditors have noticed a "distinct tightening up" of their access to documents.

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AS STAATS put it, government agencies have become "supercautious," thereby causing "tremendous delays" in GAO's investigations. Worst offenders: the State, Defense and Treasury Departments.

State's Agency for International Development, for example, ordered its employees not to disclose any "recommendations or planning data" to the GAO.

Treasury's Internal Revenue Service simply refuses to let the GAO look at its

books, although IRS records are made available to other agencies. "As a practical matter," Staats told Spear, "we don't see why they should cooperate with so many others and not cooperate with the GAO."

Even the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a quasi-governmental agency, has refused to open its files to the auditors. Last fall, the GAO requested some records, but CPB responded by circulating a confidential memo to its officers instructing them not to cooperate. They were told to say that the inquiries were "beyond the scope" of GAO's authority and that they, therefore, "declined to pursue the matter."

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PRESIDENT NIXON himself set the pattern by invoking executive privilege to block the GAO from examining "internal working documents" for military assistance and foreign aid spending.

What the President once promised would be an "open" administration has become a cover-up administration.

Footnote: Staats feels the situation is so serious that he is asking Congress for authority to take uncooperative agencies to court. If an agency should still refuse to cooperate, the GAO wants the legal right to cut off their funds.