

Keep Off Our Mind

If the Government gets its way at Federal Court hearings Monday in Washington, anyone who seeks to demonstrate in front of the White House or for a half-dozen blocks around will practically have to put his life history in writing, say he never believed in anything, and thought only pure thoughts pleasing to the police.

The proposed regulations for protest groups are so rigid and detailed as to have the effect of ending the right of petition—by peaceful banner, button or person. Only people who would not deem it their Constitutional right to seek redress from the Government lawfully would qualify; neuters only need apply.

Somewhat embarrassed, the Interior Department, which through the National Park Service has jurisdiction over the sidewalk around the Executive Mansion, has disclaimed credit for writing the regulations. The assumption in Washington is that it is the handiwork of the Justice Department but, actually, the quotations in the document sound as if they were written by Chairman Mao Tse-tung in original English.

Somebody at Justice ought to be scolded for poor grammar and syntax, apart from poor law. But the 33-part questionnaire gets its point across nevertheless. Anyone who ever advocated demonstrating, disobeyed police, confronted authority, participated violently in "his own or his organization's stated goals" (sic) must tell all. Even the "props" such as "arm-bands" and "distinguishing dress" must be filed by petitioners.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which is challenging the Justice Department, advocates a simple six-question form. It would notify the Park Service of the date and time and the number of persons in a group who would be demonstrating. Governmental authority has a right to say to demonstrators, Keep Off the Grass. But what it is saying now is, Keep Off Our Mind.