

In The Nation: Vive la Difference

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, March 6— President Johnson's special representatives are studying the Central Intelligence Agency to see what changes, if any, should be made following the discovery that the agency had penetrated a number of private organizations while carrying out its work.

The difficulty is that no conceivable recommendation can reach the most difficult problem that has been disclosed—the attitudes of the men who carry out secret operations, of those supposed to be in "control" of them, and of the politicians who underwrite the effort.

The New York Times published this morning a compilation of the views of many of these men, none of whom could be quoted and few of whom will even talk to the press under normal circumstances. It was a disturbing account.

Public Blamed

Those interviewed appeared to be upset only at what they considered a setback to their program. They believed it now would be harder for them to do their work. And they tended to blame a naive public for not understanding the nature of the challenge.

They made it clear that they regarded the United States as in a battle with "Communism"

for influence in other countries; that they thought this battle could only be won with the aid of extensive covert expenditures and propaganda; and that whatever "the other side" did in this war had to be matched by "our side."

Now that the C.I.A.'s secret connection with the National Student Association has been broken, for instance, the intelligence men fear there will be no American delegation at the world youth festival in Sofia next year; and one said that "the question is whether the international youth movement is going to be taken over completely by the Communists without a fight."

More Important Question

But there is a more important question: Is there any reason why an American delegation cannot be financed openly and honorably by the Federal Government, or by one of the private foundations untainted by C.I.A. money?

There is no reason and there never was any reason except the reluctance of Congress to appropriate such money; that is why the C.I.A. has had to hand it out secretly. But if student activities are as important as the agency rightly claims, if American representation at Sofia and elsewhere is now endangered, surely the Administration could make a good

case in Congress for the small amounts needed, especially since the publicity of recent disclosures.

That not only would provide representation, it would provide it honestly and openly, without taint of espionage. And if its Government sponsorship would then be public knowledge, certainly the government sponsorship of Communist delegations is as widely known.

Vital Propaganda

The officials interviewed laid great stress on the vital importance of propaganda and secret influence in other countries. As one man said, putting "a little money" into a free labor union "to keep it alive" may be necessary; but can it only be done by subverting similar organizations in our own society? And can it really be contended that secret tampering with and subsidization of governments, institutions and individuals in other countries is anything but a sort of last-ditch stand made necessary only by the failure or absence of other, more open means?

Such means exist—effective aid to hard-pressed economies, for instance (which Congress is so reluctant to vote); sensible assistance, education and training programs; friendly and understanding efforts to help people help themselves; even military protection, if that be-

comes necessary. Such efforts to help the under-privileged of the world begin to realize their aspirations simply dwarf the importance of secret operations, propaganda and purchased influence.

It may be more glamorous, easy and acceptable in Congress to fight "Communism"—if there is any such monolithic force as the term implies—with covert operations and "dirty tricks," rather than with aid, understanding, friendship and example. But to accept the view that whatever the "other side" does has to be done by "our side" is the moral equivalent of justifying the means by the end; it is the political negation of the idea that there are democratic, American means of accomplishing worthwhile ends; and it begs the question whether, in the long run, there is any real difference between "our side" and "the other side" worth fighting about.

No one can deny that there is a struggle in the world from which Americans cannot escape, but some of them will persist in believing that there is a difference in what this nation and its adversaries stand for, and that that difference requires of us not only the fight itself but different means of waging it.

If that be naïveté, make the most of it.