



Defining Whistle-blowing

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Washington

THE AXIOM of the Nixon administration, as propounded by Attorney General John Mitchell, was, "Don't watch what we say, but what we do."

For Jimmy Carter it seems to be reversed. That is, we are supposed to heed what he says, but pay less attention to what he does.

You take the Civil Service reform program he ceremoniously unveiled at the National Press Club. One of its provisions calls for creation of a special unit to protect "whistle-blowers," those civil servants who occasionally break ranks and tell us taxpayers what is really going on.

Yet, minutes later, the President greeted with obvious irritation a question about a conspicuous whistle-blower, Frank Snepp, the ex-CIA agent, who wrote a book about the agency's catastrophic failure at the time of the fall of Saigon and is being sued by the Justice Department.

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SNEPP OBVIOUSLY doesn't correspond to Carter's idea of a whistle-blower, because in the President's view, he did not "reveal anything that would lead to an improvement in our security apparatus or the protection of Americans' civil rights."

The President also engaged in what might be considered "prejudicial pre-trial publicity," since he implied that Snepp had revealed "our nation's utmost secrets" — which not even the government has charged in its complaint.

What Snepp is being sued for is breach of contract. Like all other CIA employees, he signed an oath that he would not "publish or participate

in the publication of any information or material related to the agency or its activities . . . without specific prior approval by the agency . . . Or disclose any classified material without proper authorization.'

But in "Decent Interval" Snepp was meticulous about not giving sources or methods or names of people whose lives would be endangered. And he recounts his dogged efforts to go through agency channels to produce an "after-action" report that would tell the agency what went wrong.

Snepp, a 34-year-old North Carolinian, makes the point that he tried to blow the whistle from the inside.

While he was still in good standing at the CIA he tried to tell the inspector-general about the avoidable horrors of the U.S. evacuation of Saigon — and the abandonment of thousands of Vietnamese agents and collaborators. He was told, he says, "We can't deal with anything so controversial."

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HIS BASIC defense is that his oath was invalidated by the actions of such luminaries as Henry Kissinger, former CIA director William E. Colby, former U.S. ambassador to Vietnam Graham Martin and former CIA Station Chief Thomas Polgar, who "selectively" leaked to the press classified documents in their efforts to put a better face on the blindness and bungling which led to the catastrophe of April 1975.

Snepp, in court, will be showing the agency its warts once again. That's what whistle-blowers do, and Carter says he wants to encourage them. It's hard to prove by his actions in the Snepp case.