

Unintelligence

"The Agency shall have no police, subpoena, law-enforcement powers, or internal-security functions," states the National Security Act of 1947 creating the nation's Central Intelligence institutions. Scarcely having lived down the unsavory image of running an "invisible government," officials of the Central Intelligence Agency have now allowed the organization to be used as a sort of secret police for the Nixon Administration.

The latest institutional victim of the decay spreading out from the Watergate is an organization with such capacity for free-wheeling operation that it can ill afford the slightest taint of misuse. One would have thought this point obvious to the agency's Deputy Director, Marine Gen. Robert E. Cushman, when he reportedly received a telephone call from John Ehrlichman at the White House in 1971 asking for undercover assistance on a sensitive operation. By the agency's own depositions, it took nearly five weeks for the intelligence authorities to realize they were being used illegally. Only then did they cut off the facilities provided to help in the rifling of the files of Daniel Ellsberg's California psychiatrist.

General Cushman is no novice in White House circles. He had served Vice President Nixon for four years as military aide; last year Mr. Nixon picked him out of the C.I.A. to become Commandant of the Marine Corps and member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He has now been summoned to give his version of the Ellsberg incident to a Congressional committee. Did he, for instance, bother to question the alleged "national security" need for the requested facilities? Or was it enough just to have a simple call from the President's man, whatever the law says?

When institutions of democratic government function through a personal network in defiance of legal procedures, disaster can only follow. And it is an ironic footnote that even the C.I.A. can now see that bureaucratic "favors" are not necessarily reciprocated in the present Administration: Watergate burglar James W. McCord has disclosed an audacious—and abortive—attempt to blame the C.I.A. for the Watergate operation and thus transfer guilt away from Mr. Nixon's political apparatus, the Committee for the Re-election of the President. The honor of the Government, it would seem, is more expendable than the reputation of a partisan political machine.

Cronyism has a long and inglorious tradition in the American Presidency. Of all the organs of government where it is out of place, security and intelligence services are the most crucial. Valuable work performed by the Central Intelligence Agency, like that of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has now been tainted by the inexcusable overeagerness of a few misguided men to heed dubious whims wafted from the White House.