

GOP Group Urges Limiting Secrecy

Washington

Warning that government secrecy is increasingly being used by the White House to stifle public debate over foreign policy, the Ripon Society urged Congress yesterday to limit the number of presidential aides authorized to classify documents and to provide penalties for overclassifying documents.

A "National Security Information Act" proposed by the society, a liberal Republican policy and research group, would "restore a balance between the need for official secrecy to ensure national security and the need for official openness to ensure adequate debate," according to a paper the organization issued.

"Although government secrecy is important for national security, today it's more significant role is a tactical, political weapon, employed by the executive branch to prevent legitimate, democratic challenges to its international policies," the society charged.

The society recommended legislation that would guarantee the House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees and the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees "access to all top secret information — without any access controls imposed by the executive branch." Those committees, and not the White House, would control the release of top secret information to other members of Congress, the society suggested.

The Ripon Society also proposed that Congress fix the length of time a document should be classified at each clearance level, and that if the White House wanted to extend the period "it should be forced to accept the burden of proof."

The society also urged President Nixon to withdraw his proposal to make leaking classified information a crime, regardless of whether or not the information was properly classified.

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