

Sorensen and the CIA



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Washington

WHEN THEODORE C. Sorensen moved away from the false, and even stricken, cordiality of the senators and started for the dock, he was asked how he felt.

"Well," he said wryly, "Gary Gilmore and I ..." His voice trailed off.

He had had ample warning that the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence had turned into a firing squad. The only mercy he was being granted was the chance for a last word — and he had to wait for that.

His executioners wanted to look the cameras in the eye and cry for the CIA. You would have thought that the "rogue elephant" agency was a battered child, such tenderness and solicitude was expressed for the "confidence" that it might not be able to summon for a director who was not one of its own.

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NONE MADE REFERENCE to the CIA's criminal past. Sorensen's cavalier attitude toward classified documents — he freely admitted he took some home — had obviously driven all memories from their minds.

Nobody thought to mention that the CIA had shredded thousands of classified documents so that the country was kept in the dark about poisons and plots, illegal spying on American citizens, and its involvement in Watergate. The CIA has been completely rehabilitated in the eyes of its new "oversight" committee.

Doubts had dogged the appointment of John Kennedy's speechwriter from the first. The only Camelot survivor to be tapped for the top by Jimmy Carter is not a man of many friends, being stiff-necked and wintry.

The things that the committee held against

Sorensen were, in fact, the best reasons for confirming him.

He was a conscientious objector. Excellent. The CIA has been as violence-prone as a ghetto junkie. Sorensen might have led them along more cerebral paths.

He testified in the Ellsberg trial. The senators were appalled. Daniel Ellsberg was a troublemaker who had spilled the Pentagon Papers. Marvelous. Sorensen had struck a blow for disclosure.

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AS A DEFENSE WITNESS, he freely testified that he had taken home from his White House services 67 boxes of documents, seven of them classified. Even some members of the firing squad admitted that the rules of classification are "ambiguous" and "opaque."

Sorensen noted that it was the custom in those pre-Watergate days for departing officials to take their papers with them. But while much has been made at the hearings of Griffin Bell of the "temper of the times" to explain his service to a segregationist governor of Georgia, not a single voice was raised — until after Sorensen had unexpectedly and safely withdrawn himself from contention — to point out that there was nothing illegal about it, or even, in that era, improper.

The sudden, massive failure of nerve among the Democratic senators was matched, apparently, in Plains. Mr. Carter did not wish to have blood on the floor during inaugural week.

Although the decision was said to have been jointly arrived at, and Sorensen may well have wished to spare himself the ordeal of looking at the grim faces of Jacob Garn and Barry Goldwater for weeks on end, it was obvious that Mr. Carter did not want to take on the right wing on the sensitive subject of "national security."