

Indiscreet C.I.A. ... MAR 20 1976

In the course of what was described as an unclassified briefing of a group of aeronautics experts, the Central Intelligence Agency volunteered the information that Israel has 10 to 20 nuclear weapons available for use.

Under any circumstances, such a unilateral disclosure of a friendly nation's alleged nuclear capacity would appear to be an astonishing breach of military as well as diplomatic faith and protocol. Coming as it does at the very moment when proposed American arms shipments to Egypt have run into some Congressional and public opposition, the C.I.A.'s advertisement of Israel's real or suspected nuclear capacity assumes ugly political overtones. This deliberate disregard of an allied power's security will inevitably affect relationships both among Middle Eastern nations and between them and the United States, whether the C.I.A.'s information is accurate or not.

Against the background of the current predilection by Congress and the Ford Administration for investigations of unauthorized disclosure of governmental secrets, it would be remarkable indeed if this incident were to escape close scrutiny. Did the C.I.A. spokesman take it upon himself to make public a matter of such delicacy, or was he acting under orders as part of a deliberate strategy to influence public or Congressional opinion? If the latter should prove true, was the C.I.A. trying to shape policies which are clearly beyond its intelligence-gathering mandate, or was the agency being used for tactical purposes by the White House, the State Department or the Pentagon?

The C.I.A.'s curiously loose tongue illustrates the continuing confusion concerning the agency's proper role; but it also suggests the diversionary nature of much of the present furor over Congressional leaks of classified information to the news media.