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The Firing of Otto F. Otepka

Security Officer Called Foe of Trickiness And Laxity and His Discharge 'Shabby'

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Otto F. Otepka, who has been fired by Secretary Dean Rusk, is described as the last old-line security officer holding a top position in the Department of State. In other words, there has been a housecleaning of personnel security officials in the Kennedy administration to remove the last traces of the tougher policies of previous administrations.

Mr. Otepka was a Government employe for 27 years, pursuing the perilous career of investigating and evaluating the loyalty, stability and integrity of applicants for Federal employment. He was rated "excellent" by those who judge the efficiency of Government employes. He received the Meritorious Service Award from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

Mr. Otepka was fired for telling the truth to the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee on sloppy and tricky practices in the enforcement of personnel security regulations in the State Department. He undercut his superiors, the unforgivable sin of Federal bureaucracy.

This he did under the protection of United States Code, Title 5, Paragraph 652 (DC), which states that the "right" of a civil service employe to give information to Congress "shall not be denied or interfered with."

Without guile, Mr. Otepka, frankly and openly and in defiance of his superiors, cooperated with counsel for the Internal Security Subcommittee to furnish further support for the subcommittee's conclusion that the enforcement of personnel security in the State Department is lax and dangerous.

For this, Mr. Otepka was accused of giving the subcommittee secret or restricted information—information, by the way, which was so innocuous and trifling in its security content as to be laughable.

To pin the goods on Mr. Otepka, his associates in the State Department tapped his telephone. They locked him out of his office and denied him access to his files. They rifled through his wastebasket and explored his "burn bag," a container into which telltale scraps of paper must be dumped for burning. He was openly humiliated before other employes.

Mr. Otepka got worse than he ever gave to any applicant for Federal employment, for he was widely known as rational and careful in this highly sensitive business.

The conclusion cannot be escaped that the worst offense this rational and careful employe committed was to have been connected with the more strictly applied security regulations of the past. He was connected with former officials whose memory is hated in some State Department quarters. And when he saw laxity and trickiness developing in personnel security he would not be stilled by any fear of losing his job or the condemnation of his superiors.

Mr. Otepka denies the specific charges brought against him, mainly of clipping off the classification stamps on the documentary evidence he supplied the Senate subcommittee.

He did not do it, he says, and it will be very hard to prove that he did, for the

evidence as presented is flimsily circumstantial. What Mr. Otepka does not deny is that he testified before the committee in response to its request and helped counsel for the committee frame questions that would show the lax practices of his associates and superiors.

In the process of getting rid of Mr. Otepka, one State Department employe is accused of higher venality than Mr. Otepka himself. This employe is charged with lying under oath in denying the tapping of Mr. Otepka's telephone.

The whole business is unsavory and shabby in some of its aspects, and no more so than in the basic doctrine behind Mr. Otepka's discharge. For this, and little else in the Otepka case, Secretary Rusk must bear responsibility. He placed the matter of employe loyalty, operating through channels and "playing on the team" ahead of the more important matter of the efficiency and effectiveness of Government policy.

Now there is to be a transparently meaningless process of appeal on Mr. Otepka's discharge in which Mr. Rusk and President Kennedy will pass on their own decisions.

The Otepka case probably never will become a flaming public issue, and this is too bad because it so aptly illustrates the Kennedy administration technique of diversion and counteraction when it comes under supported criticism. This was the case in the Billie Sol Estes scandal, in the TFX investigation, in the resignation of Navy Secretary Korth, and now once again when a strong case has been made against the personnel security policies of the State Department.