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Perot's swashbuckling

H. Ross Perot's claim that he organized and financed a raid earlier this month on an Iranian prison to free two employees of his computer company raises troubling questions. Yet the State Department and Iranian officials argue that the incident could not have been orchestrated as Perot described it. And the Justice Department is hesitant to investigate.

Regardless of its aura of heroics, if Perot's story is true, the Texas millionaire violated a law which forbids a private citizen from mounting an expeditionary force against a foreign country.

The danger of such exploits, however glamorous they may seem when they succeed, is hair-raising. Individuals or corporations whose interests bear no relation to overall US policy could create a situation in which this country is forced to act. Such uncontrolled escapades could lead to war, with or without immediate American involvement. Yet Perot has boasted of bribing Iranians to stage a riot that resulted in the escape of his two employees and some 11,000 Iranian and foreign inmates from a Tehran jail.

The episode is unpleasantly reminiscent of the role played by ITT in the 1973 overthrow of the Allende government in Chile. The fact that ITT acted in that case

with the sanction of the Central Intelligence Agency, combined with the revelation that former CIA pilots were recruited for the Iran mission, raises questions of similar secret involvement by the CIA in the Perot exploit.

If the CIA was involved in the Perot incident, it conjures anew the spectre of the nation's intelligence agency acting out of synchronization with US foreign policy. The United States has just recognized the Khomeini regime and, in view of the new government's recent rescue of the besieged US ambassador and his staff in Tehran, the Administration cannot react casually to Perot's adventure.

Perot attempted a dramatic rescue of US POWs in North Vietnam nearly 10 years ago and it is conceivable that his Texas Ranger sally into Iran happened as he said it did.

The US government cannot sweep this incident aside and call it fantasy. The Justice Department ought to investigate the matter thoroughly to determine whether the CIA was involved and whether Perot, in fact, violated the law. The incident is too serious and disturbing to be laughed off as a cowboy story.