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A Duty to Subvert Government?

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BRITAIN TODAY has an even more sensational political scandal than Irangate, nonetheless posing the same problems of secret power and accountability, and of what an individual should do

By William Pfaff

when conviction clashes with an elected government's policies.

The British affair is of alleged treason, among other high crimes. An element in the British security service, MI5, is said to have conspired to undermine two British governments at the beginning of the 1970s.

The story is set forth by a former officer of MI5 named Peter Wright. He claims that some 30 members of MI5, politically motivated, conspired to overthrow the Labor government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson, and that they also tried to discredit the Conservative government of Edward Heath between 1970 and 1974. Prime Minister Wilson was held to have about him people

working for the KGB, or even to be himself compromised by the Soviet or East Bloc intelligence services. Mr. Heath was thought insufficiently anti-Communist.

Mr. Wright says the CIA was also involved, and that he and his colleagues "bugged and burgled our way across London" during a five-year period. He says that he himself committed 23 criminal acts and 12 acts of treason in the course of the affair.

One interpretation of this affair is that it was simply a rogue operation by right-wingers in the secret service. A more circumstantial argument holds that whatever it eventually became, it began with authorization at highest MI5 levels, based on credible information concerning Mr. Wilson or his associates, and that "far from being a conspiracy to bring down an elected government, the operation was aimed at protecting that government from danger by subversive agents" (to quote an anonymous apologist for MI5). The phrasing of this explanation is not without ambiguities.

The underlying question is an important one: What does a responsible security service do if it has good reason to think that a nation's leader is compromised by foreign agents or unshakably under their influence? What does it do if its officers become convinced that the executive arm of government, to which it owes obedience, is itself insecure? What do responsible officials do if they believe their government's policies actually betray the nation?

The last question transports us from London to Washington, and to the Irangate hearings. In this case officials took policy in their own hands, convinced that Congress's

ban on U.S. government support for the Nicaraguan contras was wrong and that they had a duty, or right, to break the law.

Even if these people acted with President Reagan's implied endorsement, the problem posed is that of individuals in government who come to believe they possess a private grasp, lacking to the public, of some great issue, and that they accordingly have a moral

obligation to do something about it even to the extent of breaking the law.

If a democratic nation freely elects for itself a course toward ruin, do responsible people inside the government have to go along with this? To act to do otherwise may amount to subversion or treason. What does an honorable man do in such extreme circumstances?

The key distinction seems to me to be that between moral issues and political ones. It is a recognizable distinction even if the two often overlap. An official seems to me obliged to confront, fight, and in the extreme case disobey or subvert, an immoral national policy. This is something which involves many prudential considerations, but the principle seems to me unassailable. The obvious modern example is that of the July 20 conspirators in the wartime German government who tried to overthrow Hitler.

But we are not talking about extreme cases in the MI5 and Irangate affairs. We are talking about people who interfere with

elected governments on political or security grounds, and do so when there are alternative courses available within the political system. That this occurs, and possibly is occurring more often than the public thinks, is a disquieting matter. To employ secret powers to thwart the policy of an elected legislature or undermine a government, thereby denying the public will, is an act destructive of representative government.

To the individuals involved, of course, things are never so clear. When they possess power for which they are not publicly accountable, the possibilities offered by that power can become intoxicating. This is what happened in Washington, and it quite possibly is what happened in Britain. We may never know in the British case. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher refuses to offer a full explanation or to order an inquiry.

Americans, not to speak of the British, are nonetheless inclined to be complacent. Each scandal is interpreted as a reassurance that "the system is working." One wonders, though, if there may not be more occasions than we know when it did not work; and if we can so confidently rely on its continuing to work.