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Sloppy Silence

Measured by what its highest officials say or don't say, the Reagan Administration seems to have a curious sense of priorities when it comes to dealing with the loss of sensitive information. Let word of some politically embarrassing blunder or dubious covert enterprise leak to Congress or the press, and the highest officials rush to warn that the very foundations of the Republic may have been imperiled, while threatening lie-detector tests for everyone in sight. But let an administrative fiasco occur that could genuinely jeopardize national security, and top people keep silent while lesser functionaries are sent to mumble uninformative explanations. Two recent cases illustrate the point.

Last month, to take the more current example first, a House subcommittee revealed—no doubt on the basis of a leak—that Lockheed Corp. had managed to lose an incredible 1,400 documents dealing with a project so secret that the Defense Department refuses even to acknowledge its existence. Some of the documents have been missing since 1983. An official of the Pentagon, which sets security standards for contractors working on classified projects, described the loss of the documents as a "near-disaster," but now says that his department has either located or knows what happened to them. The ambiguity of the second part of

that statement is somewhat less than reassuring.

Losing documents is bad enough. Losing people is worse. A few years ago the CIA hired Edward Lee Howard and trained him to become an espionage agent in Moscow, telling him a lot of secrets in the process. Then the CIA found out that Howard had certain disqualifying character defects, and fired him. It let a year go by, though, before it told the FBI that Howard might be someone to keep an eye on. Meanwhile, the unhappy Howard had established contact with Soviet intelligence. The FBI got on to him, but one night Howard evaded surveillance and disappeared. Now, the Russians say, he is in Moscow, telling all. At least one Russian working for the CIA is believed to have been killed as a result.

It is impossible to say how much harm may have been done by the Howard defection, or what if any damage was done in the Lockheed case. What is clear is that here are two recent examples—there have been others in the near past, including that of KGB defector/redefector Vitaly Yurchenko—in which inexplicable sloppiness has occurred in the security area. The Administration has had little to say about these serious matters, and what explanations it did offer came only under congressional pressure. Left to its own, the Administration probably would have had nothing to say at all.