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EDITORIALS.

The Leak Mania

Now that the rehabilitation of Richard Nixon is under way, according to a recent *Newsweek* cover story, it makes sense that a White House committee would seek to revive the plumbers unit, the leak-stopping operation that figured so prominently in the former President's political obituary. Seventies revival and Watergate retro are coming into fashion. High-level officials regularly attack the press, Administration insiders are under investigation and covert action is no longer a dirty word. Washington corruption has overtaken Miami vice as a model for criminal chic: at last count, 111 senior Administration officials have been accused of illegal or unethical conduct since January 1981, and many have been convicted and sentenced or are awaiting trial. How long can it be before President Reagan comes on television to reassure a worried nation, "I am not a crook"?

Nixon's fixation on news leakage was his undoing. The exposure of E. Howard Hunt's White House plumbing shop, after its third-rate burglary attempt at the Watergate apartments fourteen years ago this week, began the investigative process that unraveled the web of chicanery and cover-ups and led to the famous final days. Things are nowhere near that point *chez* Reagan, but the White House is again involved in a furious campaign against the leakers and publishers of embarrassing information. Director of Central Intelligence William Casey has threatened five major publications and NBC News under a 1950 espionage law (never before used against the press) for divulging items told to them by government officials, gleaned from public documents and statements, or whispered by Casey's own colleagues in one or another security agency. Secretary of State George Shultz, White House chief of staff Donald Regan and the President have all railed against the news passers and their wide receivers in order to blame the failure or unpopularity of their policies on those who spread the word. And late last month a working group of Administration security advisers delivered a secret memorandum to the White House detailing a plan for stanching leaks which would include lie-detector tests and other surveillance methods eschewed by former chief of staff James Baker, on Shultz's insistence, when the idea was broached three years ago. As so often happens with secret memos, this one was promptly leaked to the press.

Reagan has been disturbed over the years by a number of politically damaging leaks for which he has criticized his disloyal associates and the irresponsible media. His problems with budget director David Stockman, Interior Secretary James Watt, Environmental Protection Agency administrator Anne Burford and Secretary of State Alexander Haig were laid to the press. Lately, the leaks have had a national security cast, which annoys Casey. He accused NBC of aiding the enemy by interviewing Abu Abbas recently and for broadcasting an item on U.S. submarine surveillance of Soviet ports that figured in the spy trial of Ronald Pelton. *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and other publications were threatened because they reported on intercepted Libyan messages after the bombing of the Berlin disco.

The media have responded that the leaks were of no particular value to the Russians or the Libyans, that the material was public knowledge in any case and that President Reagan was the biggest leaker of the Libyan messages when he talked about them on nationwide television. But national security is obviously not the point of Casey's campaign. He is primarily concerned with secrecy as a policy in itself and as a method of governance. Leaks loom large when policy fails. The U.S. intelligence establishment has been stung by a series of crimes and blunders that cry out for a scapegoat. The foreign affairs establishment is stymied in the Middle East, in Central America, in the great East-West encounter. The raid on Libya, far from a foreign policy victory, represents an open admission of failure; good diplomats open doors rather than close them.

Reagan and Casey want to stonewall in their towers of power and rule by handout, which is a tempting form of news management and political control in a troubled time. But the Watergate revival works against them. We are still too close to the great days of Woodward and Bernstein, Sam Ervin and John Sirica to forget that an Administration loses everything when it destroys its credibility.

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