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BY CORD MEYER

WHO GUARDS THE GUARDIANS?

WASHINGTON -- AFTER MORE THAN 10 MONTHS OF DIFFICULT PREGNANCY AND PROLONGED BIRTH PAINS, THE NEW EXECUTIVE ORDER TO GOVERN THE CONDUCT OF U.S. INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES IS AT LAST READY FOR PRESIDENT REAGAN'S SIGNATURE.

THIS FINAL VERSION OF THE ORDER WILL NOT SATISFY EITHER THOSE CONSERVATIVES WHO DEMANDED THE UNLEASHING OF THE CIA OR THOSE LIBERALS WHO WANTED TO TIGHTEN THE RESTRICTIONS ON AGENCY BEHAVIOR. BUT MODERATES ON BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE AGREE THAT A COMPROMISE HAS BEEN REACHED THAT MEETS THE REAL NEEDS OF THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY, WHILE PROTECTING THE RIGHTS AND PRIVACY OF INDIVIDUAL AMERICANS.

IN THE PROCESS OF ARRIVING AT THIS UNEASY COMPROMISE, HOWEVER, PARTISAN DIVISIONS WERE OPENED WITHIN THE SENATE AND HOUSE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEES THAT THREATEN THEIR FUTURE CAPACITY TO ACT AS IMPARTIAL CONGRESSIONAL WATCHDOGS. ESTABLISHED NOW BY LAW WITH THE RIGHT OF FULL ACCESS TO THE MOST SENSITIVE INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION, THESE COMMITTEES REPRESENT A FIRST ATTEMPT BY A DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT TO PREVENT THE ABUSE OF SECRET POWER THROUGH INFORMED LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT OF ALL INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITY.

NO OTHER WESTERN DEMOCRACY ENTRUSTS ITS DEEPEST SECRETS TO ANY PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE, AND THIS UNIQUE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT CAN ONLY SUCCEED SO LONG AS THE TWO INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEES MAINTAIN THE BIPARTISAN APPROACH AND STRICT SECURITY DISCIPLINE WITH WHICH THEY BEGAN.

IT IS THE POLITICAL POLARIZATION, PARTICULARLY IN THE SENATE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE, THAT TROUBLES THOSE WHO HAD HOPED THAT RESPONSIBLE CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT WAS THE WAY TO RECONCILE THE REQUIREMENTS OF OPEN DEMOCRACY WITH THE NEEDS OF SECRET INTELLIGENCE.

THE TROUBLE BEGAN EVEN BEFORE PRESIDENT REAGAN WAS INAUGURATED. THREE CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN STAFFERS FROM THE SENATE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE WERE SOMEHOW APPOINTED TO THE REAGAN TRANSITION TEAM ON INTELLIGENCE WHERE THEY LOBBIED FROM WITHIN FOR RADICAL CHANGES IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY, ONLY TO RETURN TO THEIR STAFF JOBS WITH THE COMMITTEE WHEN THIS TRANSITION TEAM DISBANDED. THIS SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN A CLEAR CONFLICT OF INTEREST WITH THEIR ROLES AS IMPARTIAL OVERSEERS.