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Beware of self-anointed guardians of morality

Bob Woodward's "beat" on the CIA bugging of Micronesians negotiating the future status of their islands illustrates the problem of protecting the national interest against self-anointed guardians of the national morality.

Woodward's source tells him that a limited bugging of these negotiators has continued through the meetings of last May and June. My sources report none of this activity has occurred this year and that CIA Director George Bush has ordered it not be resumed until the Justice Department rules whether it is legal to practice espionage against residents of an American trusteeship.

However, no officials seem ready to deny that at some earlier time an intelligence effort was made to learn what the Micronesian negotiators were saying in private. The Woodward leak appears to have sprung from a Justice Department attorney assigned to review the legality issue. In leaking, he took a view that the bugging was "a disgrace," not a narrow legal issue. He is quoted as saying, "It's like bugging your children's telephone."

He is plainly not one of those Americans who spent the early 1940s jumping west across the Pacific, island by island, as part of the costly, bloody effort to

obtain stepping-stones for the invasion of Japan. Those sensitive to the sacrifices made in deference to the strategic importance of those islands would not take their future disposition lightly.

Moreover, the fact that these are simple people whose circumstances have been relentlessly diminished by alien occupiers does not insure the clarity with which they view their own best interests. Hot-heads and Judas goats can easily restore them to a situation in which they will know more suffering and deprivations. This government's paternalism toward these natives has been justified in part by their vulnerability.

The interesting question is how a partially-informed Justice official with marginal responsibility in the matter can justify a leak which will clearly embarrass the government, stir Communist outcries in the U.N. and complicate the task of insuring that these islands do not fall into enemy hands. He would, of course, answer that every citizen must disclose and decry immoral acts wherever they occur.

This is a modish view. Groups like the Center for National Security Studies work around the clock to dissolve lines of collaboration between universities

and the CIA. Those who won't accept the reform of the CIA and its observance of the new limits imposed by executive order keep pressing a line of attack which warns that all intelligence is evil.

Bush has done remarkably well in re-creating the agency's credibility with Congress. But the press still leaps at opportunities to erode the public's confidence. Some say the answer is to change the agency's name as the French changed the name of their Deuxieme Bureau. Ray Cline urges a less cosmetic adjustment that would lift the CIA out of the dirty trick business.

The Senate Intelligence Committee is considering an effort to legislate a charter for the CIA, a precise definition of what can be undertaken in undercover work abroad. This will give the moralists a chance to draw a line and a reason to keep silent after the line is drawn. But it will also consign some highly sophisticated decisions to some extremely naive legislators.

Possibly there is no real answer to the chipping away at the CIA. This may be the price of living in a nation at peace, part of the discomfort required to enjoy freedom of conscience. It may be a form of patriotism, but it is certainly not good sense.