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Covert Abuses

President Ford's defense of "covert action" by intelligence organizations against foreign governments is faulty both in its particular application to Chile and as a general tenet on foreign policy. The belatedly-revealed campaign against the government of the late President Salvador Allende adds just one more example of how executive powers can be abused when the element of effective accountability is absent.

Mr. Ford tried to put the most benign face upon the dubious Chilean exploits of his predecessor's Administration at his Monday news conference, and again yesterday in meeting Congressional leaders. Money was indeed spent to influence Chile's political process, he conceded, despite all the previous denials by senior government officials who knew better. But the President explained that this was done only "to help and assist the preservation of opposition newspapers and electronic media and to preserve opposition political parties." This explanation might be more convincing if there were any record of similar concern for democratic opposition voices in Greece under the military junta, for example, or in totalitarian South Vietnam or South Korea today—or for that matter in post-Allende Chile.

The broader question is whether such covert activities were properly conceived and policed inside the government, the legislative as well as executive branch. Key Congressional leaders who are supposed to be informed of such operations claim they were kept in the dark. Responsible committees of Congress were misled in sworn testimony by Administration officials. Inside the Executive branch the so-called 40 Committee for intelligence oversight, chaired by Henry A. Kissinger as President Nixon's national security adviser, reportedly orchestrated the anti-Allende campaign, even as government spokesmen at all levels were insistently denying any intervention in Chilean affairs.

It is not enough for the President and Secretary of State simply to brief invited Congressmen on controversial actions once they become known, as happened yesterday. As we have long advocated, the Congress should insist on more effective oversight procedures than have been exercised so far; one aim should be to break up the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of one man or a small group of anonymous officials under the limited accountability that, more than anything else, invites free-wheeling abuse of power.

It would be a rash statement to say that there is never a need for covert intelligence operations in the modern world, but stringent criteria must be established and enforced before resorting to such dangerous techniques. Lyman B. Kirkpatrick Jr., one of the nation's most experienced intelligence executives, observed several years ago: "The use of 'covert action' for the implementation of foreign policy may be even counterproductive when successful; when unsuccessful it can be catastrophic."

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