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WTOP EDITORIAL COMMENT

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JAMIE BRAGG: New disclosures about CIA activities in Chile have presented a new problem for makers of foreign policy, determining the proper role of U.S. intelligence operations. |

Editorial Director Ray White has a WTOP editorial comment.

RAY WHITE: One function of the Central Intelligence Agency has never been seriously disputed: the gathering of intelligence information and its analysis and interpretation. But for more than 25 years it has been understood, but not publicly acknowledged, that our foreign policy included on occasion clandestine intervention in the affairs of other countries. In this respect, the CIA has been accepted as one of those necessary evils, an agency that did the dirty work that normally would be considered out of bounds except that the dirty work was necessary to counteract the dirty work of communism.

Never, perhaps, has a President been so candid about this as Gerald Ford was at his last new conference. The President defended CIA activities in Chile against President Salvador Allende, who was killed in a bloody successful coup against his government. While President Ford denied direct U.S. involvement in the coup, the distinction is academic if U.S. activities helped set the stage.

Some of Allende's blood is on America's hands, and recognition of that has prompted calls for reexamining the role of intelligence in our foreign policy. We believe those calls are timely, and, for that matter, so does the Director of the CIA, William Colby.

For too long this nation has tied itself in moral knots trying to justify the sort of activity in foreign lands

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that it does not condone within its own borders. Furthermore, it's increasingly questionable whether the practical benefits have been worth all the bending of democratic principle.

Whatever the benefits, there have been major setbacks, from Chile to the Bay of Pigs to Indochina. Worse, the activities have further damaged the nation's credibility and its reputation for principled democracy. How can any nation deal with us without fearing that behind its back we are applying our double standard? The question is raised at a time when international cooperation was never more imperative, when the world's economic and political stability depends in great measure on how well nations can trust each other. Against that, we think, the supposed needs to subvert foreign governments is small indeed.

President Ford has invited Congress to play a larger role in overseeing activities of the CIA. That is the least that can be done. The subject of dirty tricks by American intelligence needs a thorough reassessment by the Executive Branch, by Congress and by the public.

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