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A Black Mark

The Otto Otepka case is surfacing again in Washington. Lawyers' briefs in the appeal of the fired State Department security officer will be filed September 29. Thereafter a hearing officer will recommend to Secretary of State Rusk either that Mr. Otepka be reinstated or that his dismissal be upheld.

Because it has dragged on for so long, and because of what it reveals about the hidden inner workings of the State Department, the Otepka case deserves recapitulation.

It probably began in 1955, when Mr. Otepka, then chief of the Evaluations Division of the State Department's Security Branch, was asked to evaluate the record of a prominent figure — as yet unidentified — who was being considered for appointment to a sensitive post in the Government.

Mr. Otepka produced evidence from secret CIA files showing that the man in question had been denied a position on a Cold War strategy board because of "reservations" about him as a "security liability."

The man was passed over for the appointment.

Twice more in five years the same name came up, and both times Mr. Otepka produced the same evaluation.

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In 1961, under a new Administration, Mr. Otepka's reservations about this person were overruled. Observers who have followed the case closely believe that Mr. Otepka's decline began then.

In 1963, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee was investigating allegations of lax security procedures in the State Department.

The subcommittee counsel called on Mr. Otepka, who produced records of his findings and recommendations in several cases, including one in which he had balked at granting "emergency" clearances for 10 persons recommended for appointment to a State Department advisory committee.

Shortly thereafter, on June 27, 1963 Mr. Otepka was removed from his job and put to shuffling papers in another assignment.

accompanied by State Department charges that Mr. Otepka had acted improperly by providing the Senate subcommittee with classified information.

Mr. Otepka's telephone was bugged. His safe was cracked by State Department officials. Four security officials who supported him were transferred to meaningless jobs, and two of these later were fired. (The two appealed, were reinstated, and promptly resigned.) Two officials perjured themselves in an attempt to cover up evidence about the telephone tapping.

Mr. Otepka was suspended formally in September, 1963, and was fired in November. He immediately appealed, but hearings on the appeal were postponed six times. The hearing finally was held last spring — four years to the month from the time he was first removed from active service as a security officer.

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The Internal Security subcommittee hearings, which produced a transcript of 1,500,000 words, revealed indications of a systematic State Department purge of "hard" anti-Communist employees, of whom Otto Otepka was one of the most prominent.

The hearings revealed indications of Executive pressure to provide security clearances for some questionable risks, including William Wieland of Castro fame.

They also revealed a picture of Otto Otepka as a stubborn, conscientious civil servant who insisted on doing his job in the face of subtle pressures designed to lower the security bars to sensitive, high-level positions. (It was revealed after Mr. Otepka was fired that 63 State Department employees, including three senior officers in the Foreign Service, had resigned in 1963 after being confronted with evidence showing they were security liabilities.)

The irony of the case is that the State Department persecutors of Otto Otepka will have won, no matter how it comes out. Even if Mr. Otepka is reinstated, which doesn't appear likely, his career is ruined. Any successor in his office will remember vividly how conscientious work is rewarded, and can be expected to trim his sails accordingly.

The affair will leave a black mark forever on the record of the State Department. In the minds of many Americans, it will cast doubt as to whether the conduct of their country's foreign affairs is in completely trustworthy hands.



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