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The Otepka Affair

News of a first rate security scandal—reminiscent of the days of Alger Hiss—has been bubbling beneath the surface in Washington for nearly two years now. Last week, part of the story, played down by liberal papers, managed to get into the press.

What triggered the news was the State Department's announcement it had plans to fire Otto Otepka, one of its top security officers, for allegedly leaking "confidential" material to unauthorized personnel. Otepka, 48, is chief of the division of evaluations in the department's Office of Security. A career civil service officer, he was instrumental in ridding the department of many security risks under Ike.

The charges against Otepka astonished lawmakers. The main indictment was that he had revealed information to the Senate Internal Security subcommittee, probing the department's operations. Stormed James Eastland (D.-Miss.), chairman of the subcommittee: "The powers of Congress are at stake. I intend to protect Mr. Otepka by every means at my command, against accusations which complain, in effect, that he told the truth when asked to do so by a Senate subcommittee."

The full Senate Judiciary Committee (including such liberals as Teddy Kennedy and Birch Bayh) unanimously voted to send Secretary of State Dean Rusk a 10-page memorandum and a covering letter by Chairman Eastland telling Rusk to halt the department's ruthless crackdown on Otepka. The memo, hand-delivered by Senator Thomas Dodd (D.-Conn.) to Rusk at the United Nations, paints a lurid picture of the Office of Security operations and accuses at least one of Bobby Kennedy's hand-picked men in the office of "uttering untruths under oath."

The public clash between the executive and Congress over what a government witness can or cannot tell Congress is considered, however, only the tip of an iceberg. Beneath lies political dynamite which the Republicans could use to their advantage in 1964. Behind the closed doors of the subcommittee Otepka has revealed a wholesale scrapping of security standards by New Frontiersmen running the Office of Security.

According to members of the subcommittee, Otepka's testimony shows that men of "questionable background"—cleared by the office—are now in key policy positions. Some of them purportedly helped draft the atomic test-ban treaty. Others, allegedly, are drawing up a non-aggression pact between Russia and the United States.

In addition, Otepka has revealed the present Administration has granted emergency clearance to top department personnel at the rate of 150 a year. Under Eisenhower, emergency clearances were granted only under highly specialized conditions, amounting to two or three per year.

The systematic shattering of security requirements—standards established during the Eisenhower years—was not sudden. Since JFK assumed the presidency, there has been a constant juggling of the Office of Security.

In 1961 the State Department drastically reorganized it, throwing out trained security personnel. Otepka, the last influential Ike appointee remaining in this branch, was ousted from his spot as deputy director (some say the Administration is conducting a vendetta against Otepka since he is held responsible for tossing Fair Deal-New Frontier friends out of the department).

Otepka was subsequently transferred to a cubby-hole office, had his phone "bugged" and had important security operations taken from him. John W. Hanes, a trained security officer and the last head of the Office of Security under Ike, blasted its reorganization at the time. He told *Human Events*: "I can only say this either is due to incompetence or a deliberate attempt to render the State Department's security section ineffective."