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Editorials

Condoning Covert CIA Activity Reprehensible

Twice within little more than a month, President Ford has condoned the covert activities of the Central Intelligence Agency without distinguishing between domestic and foreign operations.

The CIA has a legal charter to conduct espionage outside the United States, but it has broadened its activities to include surveillance of Americans on the ground that foreign duplicity is involved.

Mr. Ford may accept this explanation. If this is the case, he should have told us as much when he addressed the Congress, and later, when he permitted himself to be interviewed on CBS television.

If he accepts the CIA rationale for domestic spying he does so with a curiously bland indifference to threats to constitutional rights. If he whole-heartedly endorses all covert activity by the CIA in other lands he is condoning activity upon which the founding fathers would frown.

During the televised interview, Mr. Ford said:

"I just can't imagine the United States saying we wouldn't undertake any covert activity when knowing at the same time that friends as well as foes are undertaking covert activities not only in the United States but elsewhere."

The United States, Mr. Ford said, "cannot compete in this very real world" without covert CIA activity.

"Covert activity" is well understood in the real world of which the President spoke to mean killing, bribery, entrapment, subversion of other people's institutions, and surveillance of American citizens who have unorthodox opinions.

WE WERE dismayed to hear President Ford's endorsement of actions which, even if they were confined to foreign lands, are reprehensible and unworthy of the American tradition.

They are more than reprehensible. They undermine American credibility far more than the Indochinese policy failure has done. It is little wonder, American rhetoric about individual freedom flows in an endless stream from Washington, but such posturing is discredited by every revelation of covert CIA activity.

Unfortunately, the President isn't the only American who dons the blinkers of misguided patriotism whenever the CIA is mentioned. Not many other Americans seem to care when an agency of the United States fosters rebellion in another land, as in Chile, and, at home, disregards safeguards erected long ago to thwart repressive government.