

San Francisco Chronicle

Fun New Way To Govern America

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The San Francisco Chronicle

July 23, 1997

CAN WE ALL remember when we thought Bill Clinton was a liberal? I know I believed that; for my sins, I even said so publicly. I thought he retained some belief that government should be more open, that it should serve the people and the truth, that it should respect the Constitution.

Not that I think that Bush or Dole, the men who said that they had never ever heard about Iran-Contra until they read about it in local papers, would have been any better. I hate the overcynicism of the "they're all crooks" mentality; sometimes, however, it's hard to come up with another theory.

Today's issue is the Whistle-Blower Protection Act, a toothless although tough-sounding bill passed several years ago. There are two bills designed to strengthen the act before Congress; Our Mr. Clinton has threatened to veto both of them.

The new bills were proposed partly in response to the curious case of Richard Nuccio, who had his security clearance withdrawn by the CIA after he told some Congress members (who had the security clearance to receive such information) that the CIA was up to its ears in various civilian murders and torture deaths in Guatemala.

The information was of course embarrassing; it was also useful to legislators involved in their constitutionally mandated duties to oversee the CIA.

The new bills make it possible for government employees to provide members of Congress with information that exposes lies in sworn testimony, reveals fraud, etc., without fear of reprisal. Everything is still secret and off the record; it's just that employees can have a safe conduit to report willful deception to their actual bosses, who are the voters of the United States. Checks and balances -- it's not just a good idea, it's the law.

Clinton says the bills "usurp the president's constitutional authority to protect national security," which is the same excuse every despot since Richard Nixon has used to keep a lid on unsavory truths. It was Oliver North's mantra too; so charming to see it emerge from Bill Clinton's lips.

MEANTIME, abuses continue. Jeff Gerth of the New York Times reported on the instructive case of Richard M. Barlow, a CIA official who was ordered by his superiors not to tell Congress that testimony by other officials was inaccurate.

Their testimony was that Pakistan did not have the bomb. That was particularly important because Congress was being asked to approve the sale of F-16 fighters to Pakistan. The planes were capable of carrying nuclear bombs, so Congress wanted to know whether Pakistan had any.

Barlow said it did. Barlow was right, as even Pakistan later admitted. But when Barlow complained to his superiors about the lies being told Congress, he was fired.

Understand -- Barlow never told Congress anything. He just complained internally about the testimony. But he was fired anyway. The Whistle-Blower Act is supposed to protect people who threaten to make disclosures of malfeasances as well as those who actually do so, but it failed to work for Barlow.

Why? Because the CIA said that's not why he was fired, and that was that. Pretty neat.

BARLOW now works as a "private security consultant" in New Mexico. He's very angry. He'd like his personnel files purged of the post-facto allegations against him; he'd also like \$1 million in back wages.

The General Accounting Office recently issued a report criticizing the CIA and an internal Defense Department investigation into Barlow's firing. If you think that's made a difference in Barlow's case, you may still also believe that Bill Clinton is a liberal.

The danger here is evident. Honest public servants are being told by their president that their honesty is not welcome. They may work hard and play by the rules, but if they see the rules being broken, they should shut up and have a nice doughnut.

It's enough to make a citizen cynical.