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Entertainment

'On Company Business' focuses on activities of the CIA

By Stanley Kauffmann
The New Republic

This is the spring of the historical documentary — here is another. "On Company Business" is a three-hour job on the CIA produced by Allan Francovich and Howard Drach which, after playing at Filmox in Los Angeles, had its New York premiere in the valuable film series at the Public Theater.

Composed in the now-standard form of interwoven newsreels and new interviews, but well-composed, the three hours trace the formation of

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"On Company Business," directed by Allan Francovich of Berkeley, will be shown at 7:30 p.m. today at the University Art Museum's Pacific Film Archive, 2621 Durant Ave., Berkeley.

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the CIA after World War II and its operations in a number of countries since then, with heavy emphasis on the agency's intent to influence politics in those countries rather than to gather intelligence.

As with "The Trials of Alger Hiss," the film's onstensible tone is objectivity and there certainly are spokesmen for the CIA's point of view, like David Atlee Phillips who is candid but firmly loyal; but — again as with "Hiss" — the very

choice of subject, indeed the very carefulness of the balance, ironically leaves little doubt about the filmmakers' sympathies.

Among the ex-members of the CIA who criticize it are Philip Agee, Victor Marchetti and John Stockwell, who give their grim versions of activities in several of the countries. A. J. Langguth, former Latin American correspondent of the New York Times, makes particularly pungent comments about Dan Mitrione, who was murdered in Uruguay by terrorists. (Costa-Gavras treated the subject in "State of Siege," but the actual recording of Mitrione conversing with one of his kidnappers outdoes the film.) Edward Korry, U.S. ambassador to Chile during the Allende regime, is still bemused by Nixon's venom on the subject of Allende. Laura Allende, the sister of the president, speaks of her dead brother with touching dignity.

Not a great deal in "On Company Business" will be startling to those who read newspapers and magazines and who can do a little reading between lines. For example, Marchetti says here that, after Richard Helms, the former CIA director, was convicted of perjury, Helms said that if he hanged, a lot of others would hang with him, including Nixon and Ford. Helms was let off with a \$2,000 fine and a suspended sentence. The inference was plain at the time; Marchetti brings it forward.

Still, the film reminds and strengthens. Two matters — again not news — stood out for me: the connections between the AFL-CIO and the CIA, though stoutly denied by George Meany and others in interwoven newsreel clips; and the statements that decisions on major CIA moves — from political pressure to engagement of the Mafia for assassination attempts — are made by the president of the U.S. Over and over again we are told that this or that action goes back to the Oval Office, whoever the tenant.

The film's final effect is terribly disquieting. Like every reasonably alert person, I've known something about the shocking actions of the CIA — sometimes shocking in their ineptness — and I've shared the widespread reaction of outrage, not the least that an espionage system should be used as a terrorist-political instrument. It's not hard to understand Iran's present feelings toward the U.S. after seeing the torture rooms of the shah's secret police and after hearing an ex-official of the CIA, who dealt principally with Iran, state that the shah was pretty much a mouthpiece for U.S. decisions.

But isn't my outrage pharisaical? Isn't it a global amplification of New York City's feelings about the Woman's House of Detention that used to be in Greenwich Village? That women's prison was torn down because it was in the middle of

town and we all had to look at it.

Whatever went on there still goes on elsewhere, some place where we don't have to look at the building every day and be reminded of it. Isn't what we want a less visible, smarter, cleaner CIA that does what it has to do — in favor of progressive foreign governments rather than reactionary ones? Are we objecting to the CIA or its inefficiencies and choices of support?

It's childish in one's own life to justify actions by what others do, but is this true in international politics? What would an equivalent film about the KGB reveal? And isn't the fact that there could not conceivably be an equivalent film, publicly shown, at least a dram of an argument for the CIA? Anyone who isn't sickened by much of "On Company Business" can't be much concerned with the moral quality of his country, but isn't that sickness a variety of privilege, earned for us by others' dirty work? Isn't our feeling about the CIA an extension of our feeling about our local police?

Many of us have an instinctive dislike of them; we know that at least some men — and women — become policemen because the uniform licenses certain kinds of egos and violence and corruption. But which of us wants to do without police? Probably our ambivalence on the subject keeps us from being either smug or barbarous.