

'Operation Chaos'...

10-11-75

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WI

Instead of the whitewash that many critics had predicted, the Rockefeller Commission's report on the domestic activities of the Central Intelligence Agency is a trenchant, factual and plain-spoken document. It presents an appalling picture of illegal and improper actions conducted against American citizens in a wide range of activities and over a long period of time.

The National Security Act of 1947 establishing the C.I.A. explicitly forbade the agency from exercising any "police, subpoena, or law-enforcement powers or internal security functions." Although the word "foreign" is nowhere used in the statute, it was clearly understood that the C.I.A. was to engage only in collecting foreign intelligence.

Yet when domestic turmoil began to develop in the mid-sixties in campus demonstrations, rebellions in the black slums and the widespread protest movement against the Vietnam war, the C.I.A. under Richard Helms responded to the pressure from President Johnson to investigate domestic dissidents in the hope of finding embarrassing links to Communist countries.

No such links were ever found, but the White House pressure to pursue this will-o-the-wisp greatly intensified during the first four years of the Nixon Administration. It would be laughable if it were not sinister that the C.I.A.'s code name for this wholly illegal investigative project was "Operation CHAOS."

It is horrifying to learn that the C.I.A. had undercover contacts monitor the meetings of groups such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Washington Urban League. It maintained files on nearly a thousand organizations. By August, 1973, when C.I.A. Director Colby virtually halted this project, "the paper trail left by Operation CHAOS included somewhere in the area of 13,000 files on subjects and individuals," the report discloses. Linked to this was a computer system containing an index of over 300,000 names and organizations, almost all of them of United States citizens and organizations unconnected with espionage.

Mr. Helms and the high officials of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations with whom he dealt were well aware that they were breaking the law. Thus, in submitting to Henry Kissinger a report on "Restless Youth," Mr. Helms wrote in a covering memorandum early in 1969 that a section on American students was "extremely sensitive" because the whole area was outside the agency's charter.

For twenty years beginning in 1953, the C.I.A. surveyed mail between this country and the Soviet Union, opening several thousand letters each year. This, too, was in clear violation of the law and was finally halted at the insistence of the Chief Postal Inspector.

Like the Federal Bureau of Investigation under the late J. Edgar Hoover, the C.I.A. in selected instances engaged in wiretapping and burglary—sometimes on its own and sometimes in collaboration with the F.B.I.

What emerges from this report's account of Operation CHAOS and of mail interception, wiretapping and other misconduct is the picture of an embryonic police state. The press disclosures that forced this Presidentially directed inquiry by the Rockefeller Commission and the further investigations to come by the Senate and House committees have served to alert the nation to a development profoundly dangerous to constitutional democracy.

... C.I.A. Reform ...

The revelations in the Rockefeller report demonstrate the unwisdom of freeing the Central Intelligence Agency from all the normal legal and institutional procedures that serve to review and restrain the exercise of power by ordinary Government agencies. The law establishing the C.I.A. placed total reliance upon the good judgment of the President and the C.I.A. director.

Even at the outset, in the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations and under the canny leadership of Allen Dulles, this reliance proved insufficient to prevent some illegal activities such as the extensive mail interception program. Under later Presidents this control system totally failed.

The recommendations of the Rockefeller Commission, sound as far as they go, largely add up to imposing the restraints that help control other bureaucracies. It urges that Congress seriously consider making the C.I.A.'s budget "at least to some extent" a matter of public knowledge, instead of concealing it—as is now done—in fictitious items listed in various departmental budgets. Quite apart from all the obvious dangers such loose practice presents, it does not even seem to meet the explicit requirements of the Constitution.

The agency has not only been largely immune from the inquiries of the General Accounting Office, Congress's investigatory arm, but also has felt free to mislead the Office of Management and Budget, the President's agent for fiscal control. Amending the law and executive orders to make it clear that the C.I.A. can no longer escape normal budgetary control would do much, all by itself, to uncover and perhaps prevent the expenditure of large sums of money on illegal operations.

The C.I.A. has traditionally had an understanding with the Attorney General that the agency would investigate any criminal charges against its own employees and not refer them to the Justice Department. The commission is right to urge that this "gentleman's agreement" be abrogated and that the Justice Department reassume its proper prosecutorial role.

The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and the Congressional supervisory committees have all raffled in their trust. Had they been vigilant and aggressive the shocking misdeeds now being exposed could never have occurred or would soon have been curbed. The commission wisely recommends that the powers of the advisory board be strengthened and that Congress at long last establish a joint committee on intelligence, but not too much reliance can be placed on either of these reforms.

In this dangerous world, the United States must have a well-run agency to gather information about foreign

nations, especially those that may have hostile designs. The excesses and aberrations of the C.I.A. do not erase that necessity, nor do they cancel out the useful work the agency has performed at times in assessing various critical international situations.

The challenge to President Ford and to Congress is to devise institutions and procedures strong enough and supple enough to enable the C.I.A. to perform its essential overseas tasks without simultaneously swirling out of control and becoming a covert menace to the very freedoms it is supposed to be protecting.

... Assassination Blot

The best way to avoid suspicions of a cover-up is not to cover up. President Ford's explanations for withholding those portions of the Rockefeller Commission's report concerning allegations of political assassinations only compound the injury already inflicted by massive leaks and innuendo on this sordid issue.

It is no excuse to say, as the President did, that the subject is "extremely sensitive." Indeed it is, which is why a full and authoritative statement is the only way to prevent half-truths and gossip from acquiring a life and credibility of their own. For the President simply to refer darkly to unspecified incidents of the "past fifteen or twenty years" is in itself a veiled indictment susceptible to misuse for partisan political purposes.

The President personally broadened the Rockefeller Commission's assignment to include the reports of United States involvement through the C.I.A. in the ugly business of plotting the murder of foreign rulers. Whatever facts the commission's inquiry established should now be made public, along with whatever additional material emerges from the independent investigations now being made by two Congressional committees.

In the absence of such disclosure, Mr. Ford's statement that "I am totally opposed to political assassination" is more fatuous than reassuring.