

The Washington merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON — I don't know how other middle-aged men, beset by menopausal quirks and temptations, manage to keep on the straight and narrow, but I have found a method.

More precisely, the method has found me.

For illustration, just the other day I was browsing through the morning paper and came unexpectedly upon the admission by CIA chief William Colby that the Central Intelligence Agency has been spying on me. Well, there was a time when such tidings might have left me somewhat greenish. But I can now accept the CIA in my life with an inner serenity. I have developed this simple philosophy:

If men would but live their lives as though gumshoes from seven government agencies were always half a block behind, the appeal of the virtuous life would soon be made manifest to them.

I also get some comfort from the security that all this government attention provides. To waylay me, a bad man would have to get past a whole posse of federal flatfeet. Here is the latest count:

— In late 1970, the White House assigned Jack Caulfield, the precursor of the plumbers, to investigate me. His aim, according to a confidential Feb. 11, 1971, memo, was to make "the ability of the Andersons of the world to gain White House information both difficult and hazardous." He spent three months on the assignment, without notable results.

— The Pentagon's sleuths got on my trail in early 1971. They produced a bespectacled clerk, Eugene Smith, as our master spy and, after third-degree grillings that left him with ulcers, dragged him before a grand jury in Norfolk, Va. The U.S. attorney there, Brian Gettings, quickly concluded that Smith was the wrong man.

— Shortly thereafter, the Washington Post reported that the White House "is directing a major effort to discredit columnist Jack Anderson" — an effort the Post said involved the Justice Department, Republican National Committee and CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President). These groups were to feed "negative material about Anderson" to the press and to sympathetic senators.

— By this time, the CIA and the FBI had joined the posse. A separate investigation was directed by Robert Mardian, then an assistant attorney general, whose plainclothesmen collaborated behind the scenes with Intertel, the private eye firm, which had been hired by ITT to spy on me. Mardian has now been convicted in the Watergate case.

— 1972, the maladroit White House plumbers turned their attention from Pentagon Papers' leaker Daniel Ellsberg and scrawled my name on their blackboard as their new Public Enemy No. 1. Their relentless search for my sources led them at last to a gentle Navy yeoman and they browbeat a confession out of him that he was, indeed, a spy — not for me but for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

— The following year, the FBI considered raiding my offices, but decided instead to arrest me in the streets in the act of receiving government documents from the Indians. As it turned out, it was my associate Les Whitten who was pinched. But the prosecutor dismissed the charges as groundless and the court further humiliated the government by ordering the FBI to destroy its records of my phone calls.

— A dozen years ago, the Internal Revenue Service checked out my tax returns and couldn't find a penny out of order. The tax sleuths didn't question my returns again until my name appeared on President Nixon's enemies list. Now the IRS is preparing to check every figure, every deduction, every voucher in my 1973 returns. The computer just happened to select me, by chance, for an in-depth audit, the IRS explained.

The government's attentions to me, albeit, have had a Maxwell Smart quality. Plumber E. Howard Hunt, for example, sometimes wore a reddish wig which he would get on crooked and carried a camera disguised in a tobacco pouch.

In fairness, Hunt has contended that an impartial viewing will reveal that the wig was brownish and omission controls were engaged in secret doings that fragmented their energies. These truly momentous events ranged from burglarizing Watergate to fabricating a new version of Chappaquiddick.

The natural venality and mendacity of the Nixon regime, therefore, was tempered by administrative mismanagement, which overloaded the investigators in the field. So much to do

to so many, and so few to do it.

All this surveillance, meanwhile, has toned me up marvelously for the future. So ingrained are my deceptive habits today that even when I go out socially I change cabs en route and never fail to get off an elevator at the wrong floor.

I have a sensitive eye and memory for the location of pay phones, and in conversation my evasive code has become so effective that half the time my own staff doesn't understand my instructions.

There are other pitfalls avoided. For other men, the Washington whirl is full of lures — massage parlors, Fanne Foxe-type bistros, get-rich-quick schemes, lobbyists who can offer all that comfort and cupidity hold dear. Temptation is everywhere.

But not for me. The thought of all those cops back there, tripping over their night sticks but gaining on me, turns me right off.