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A Taste for Scandal

The New York Times charges against the CIA have not so far been bolstered by the "snowball" phenomenon, which is the tendency of a disclosure to gain weight and momentum from media attention.

Beagle packs of reporters have chased hard for over two weeks in pursuit of substance for Seymour Hersh's assertions that the CIA has been engaged in a "massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation." As of this writing no reporter, including Hersh, has printed facts that point to massive illegalities, even to really shocking incidents in which the law was blatantly flouted.

Ironically, the story is being kept alive by the government, not by any drumbeat of disclosures. Nelson Rockefeller, who had some potential for helping the President with his awesome economic dilemmas, has been diverted into the thicket of a 90-day probe. Richard Helms, pulled away from his crucial courtship of the shah of Iran, may be here for the winter.

The consensus within knowledgeable quarters of the government is that the charges, while highly exaggerated, carry kernels of truth which will cause embarrassment. This is apparently why the President, Henry Kissinger and the present CIA director, William Colby, have handled the matter in a fashion gingerly enough to fan the Times's claim of a major scandal.

Politicians and officials regularly get burnt these days by the inconsistency of the public's readiness to judge old actions by a new code of contrived purity. The purity of those who contrive the code is far from established, but they brandish it with a vehemence which gains its validity from the sins of Watergate. In these days no one cares to dispute the winds of righteousness.

This is one reason why the agency has made no move to defend itself against the charges. After less than a year as director, Colby is committed to the concept of an intelligence service more closely attuned to the popular mood. He

is not going to lose skin defending what transpired in an earlier era when he will need all his credibility to keep support for what his people are now assigned to do.

So Helms will be the instrument of his own defense and his record augurs that he will not be left another hapless victim of the Nixon era. He can be counted on to show that he took strong measures to keep his agency on its side of the legal line because he was, after all, a clever, honorable public official, well-versed in the games bureaucrats play and in the arts of self-preservation.

Hersh alleged, in his most specific charge, that the CIA maintained "intelligence files on at least 10,000 American citizens." Two weeks of inquiry make it appear that this may be a sinister reading of a highly innocuous practice. It was natural that the flow of papers from the FBI and other sources would cause files to be created and that many involved American citizens with uncertain connections abroad. Out of those files came the first information on people like the assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. In an age of jet-paced movement, files like these would seem to be a reasonable precaution for an agency concerned with espionage and counterespionage.

Clearly there was rough stuff, and no outsider has so far managed to specify its precise nature. Helms has told friends, "I didn't think when I took the oath that I was taking command of a Boy Scout troop." If those activities stemmed from attempts to learn whether the anti-war movement had foreign ties, and if they were ordered by the National Security Council, it will be hard to justify their description as a "massive, illegal domestic operation."

The fevered reaction to the Hersh charges in and out of government make the sad point that many have grown more conditioned to toying with disclosures than to fending with problems which are genuine and menacing. The country has developed an unhealthy taste for scandal.