

Honest Intelligence

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By Peter Grose

Some extraordinary chapters for the history of national intelligence services are being written these days. The head of the United States intelligence community has gone public with a remarkable description of normally secret operating procedures of the Central Intelligence Agency. The Senate is moving into an evaluation of the nation's over-all intelligence requirements, foreign and domestic, asking questions and raising issues that have gone substantially unchallenged since 1947.

In his recent testimony to a Senate committee, Central Intelligence Director William E. Colby cleared some of the air around the latest controversy about C.I.A. domestic activities, just as he introduced critical new issues for investigation away from the heat of the moment.

In the first place, he demonstrated that not everything about an intelligence service requires all the secrecy it is traditionally accorded.

Intelligence professionals may wince to have everyone know of the 36 C.I.A. field offices around the country where information about the world overseas is collected discreetly from willing and knowledgeable citizens. Many people in government and private industry are undoubtedly embarrassed at discussion of how the agency secretly contracts for supplies and equipment under cover stories and strange financial maneuvers, including those with the Internal Revenue Service. Inconvenient to have it all hang out, perhaps, but better than distorted half-truths and hardly injurious to fundamental national security or civil liberties. In Mr. Colby's favorite image, the dome of the Capitol will not collapse under the weight of such disclosure.

But Mr. Colby told of other things, too. The C.I.A. was indeed in the business of penetrating American dissident movements starting in the '60's, systematically and deceptively gathering information on other United States citizens within this country's borders. For much longer, since 1953, the C.I.A. had been opening "selected" letters dropped into public mailboxes in an (unnamed) American city.

Some, particularly those who were young and cynical in the '60's, may say it is naive now to be surprised to find the C.I.A. so engaged—except for one key point: Activities such as these are basically internal security functions, functions specifically denied to the C.I.A. by its founding statute. The agency primarily responsible for internal security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has had its own lapses from accountability and legal procedure; the current intelligence review would only confront half the problem if it failed to organize

tighter scrutiny over the F.B.I. as well as the foreign intelligence agencies.

Highly revealing were the explanations and the rationales for undertaking domestic operations, as offered in testimony by Mr. Colby and his predecessor, Richard Helms. Some things originated by Presidential directive, it was said, though apparently not in writing. Such a procedure in itself opens the way to abuse.

The men of intelligence demonstrated the ease with which seemingly legitimate prerogatives can be stretched to cover dubious activities. Much of the domestic undercover work of the C.I.A. related to "possible foreign links with American dissidents," Mr. Colby said. But suspicion of foreign meddling is an old bogey that can always be invoked to cover things unsavory—if there is no requirement to prove to anyone outside a closed circle the grounds for suspicion.

More expansive still was the agency's assertion of authority to protect its own installations, a power which Mr. Colby asks the Congress to strengthen even further. On this authority, ten C.I.A. agents were "inserted" into dissident organizations in Washington, to spy and report back on their discussions and plans for demonstrations.

In his candor, Mr. Colby showed admirable sensitivity to the political mood of the day, without sacrificing his institutional obligations to secrecy. It was from within the C.I.A. itself, moreover, that the pressure came to terminate the worst of the abuses, after a quiet internal review undertaken in 1973.

A factual conclusion to be drawn is the depth of damage done by the breakdown in operational cooperation between the C.I.A. and F.B.I. in the late '60's and early '70's. Restoration of the closest working relationships and confidence between these two organizations, with their differing responsibilities, restraints and obligations, should be a central element in any restructured intelligence establishment.

More profoundly, the legislative ground rules for the foreign intelligence system need clearer definition. If a statutory ban on police and internal security functions can still allow break-ins, domestic surveillance and crowd control, then the ban as written in 1947 is not good enough. A foreign intelligence service may legitimately expect certain carefully defined exemptions from law and disclosure; in return for that degree of tolerance, under safeguards, such an agency cannot be allowed also to interpret its mandate in a loose and expansive manner.

Peter Grose is a member of the Editorial Board of *The Times*.