

CIA Loses Access to U.S. Mail

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Postmaster General Benjamin F. Bailar has issued orders prohibiting the Central Intelligence Agency from access to "any kind of mail in the custody of the Postal Service."

Bailar notified CIA Director William E. Colby of the restrictions in a March 5 letter prompted by the CIA's disclosures earlier this year of unauthorized mail intercepts over a 20-year period.

According to congressional testimony by postal authorities and other information that has since come to light, the CIA obtained approval to conduct various "mail covers"—which are limited to the recording of information on outside wrappings and envelopes—and then surreptitiously began opening selected mail without the knowledge of postal officials.

Thousands of first-class letters between the United States and the Soviet Union and hundreds of incoming air-mail letters from China were intercepted by CIA agents before the CIA finally halted the projects in February, 1973. The practice, however, remained a closely held secret until Colby alluded to it in congressional testimony in January and February.

Bailar, who became Postmaster General in mid-February, said in his letter to Colby that the disclosures had given him "most serious concern."
"Consequently," Bailar

wrote, "I have instructed the Postal Inspection Service to make sure that Central Intelligence Agency personnel are not permitted to have access to any kind of mail in the custody of the Postal Service, whether by way of cooperative mail covers or otherwise."

Normally, "mail covers" are conducted by postal officials who handle the mail themselves and then supply the requested information, such as the names and addresses of the senders, to the law enforcement agencies requesting it. However, CIA agents themselves were permitted to process the Soviet and Chinese mail.

Bailar's orders were evidently designed to prevent that from happening again, although presumably postal officials might be willing to conduct mail covers on behalf of the CIA.

Postal officials released the correspondence, including Colby's March 13 reply, without comment.

In his reply, Colby said he shared the Postmaster General's concern over protecting the integrity of the mail and said the CIA had "no intention of reinstating" its mail-opening program.

Bailar had asked for Colby's assurance that "no such operations are presently active or planned, and that in the future the Central Intelligence Agency will refrain from any undertaking that might draw the integrity of the mails into question."