

# CIA still operating N.O. 'mail cover'

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The Central Intelligence Agency still records names of senders and recipients of foreign mail through New Orleans and other cities, but no longer opens such letters, authoritative sources in Washington report.

New Orleans district postmaster Paul Burke denied any knowledge of this "mail cover" operation and Hugh Carter of Memphis, who directs postal inspection operations here, said he could not comment on the report.

The sources also told the Washington Star the CIA has never ceased its practice of opening and scrutinizing mail overseas, even though it stopped that practice inside the U.S. in 1973.

THE CIA contends according to official sources, that its ongoing mail cover operations within the United States are entirely legal since they do not involve surreptitious opening, reading or photographing of mail. Such mail covers, widely used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other intelli-

gence agencies, involve keeping a record of the names and addresses of senders and recipients of mail without looking at the contents. CIA officials declined to comment on their current mail cover operations.

Testimony before a House judiciary subcommittee last week disclosed that the agency for 20 years conducted an illegal mail interception program. CIA Director William E. Colby has publicly acknowledged that the practice of opening and copying overseas mail to and from Americans was illegal and that he ordered it stopped in February, 1973.

But chief postal inspector William J. Cotter testified that the CIA ceased the practice only in the face of an ultimatum from the U.S. Postal Service. Cotter told the subcommittee in closed session that he made repeated efforts beginning in 1969 to force the agency to cease mail interceptions but was frustrated by tactics of former CIA Director Richard

Helm. COTTER SAID the mail-opening practice, which involved thousands of letters over the 20-year span, was ended only after he gave the agency a deadline of Feb. 15, 1973. Cotter testified before the subcommittee, headed by Rep. Robert W. Kastenmeier, D-Wis., Tuesday and his testimony was released Friday.

The opening of first-class mail by domestic intelligence agencies, such as the FBI, is permissible only with a warrant. CIA officials acknowledge that opening mail in the United States is illegal for the agency under any circumstances and constitutes a violation of its charter. Cotter and another witness, former CIA official Mel Crain,

testified that the mail-opening operations were conducted at three locations in the United States—New York, San Francisco and New Orleans. According to reliable sources, mail also was opened at a fourth location in the United States. It is understood that Colby has testified in closed session that four locations were involved.

Cotter's testimony was that the project was launched in 1963 with the apparent understanding between CIA and postal officials that it did not involve opening mail. But Cotter said that after the project began, the agency began opening some of the letters without the knowledge of postal officials. Crain, who resigned from the CIA in 1959, said at least six intercepted letters a day were received in the Soviet division, in which he worked. Cotter, also a former CIA employee, said he knew of mail from China being intercepted at San Francisco and that the agency had access to Cuban mail at New Orleans.