

Watergate Ended CIA Mail Spying

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The man in charge of the Central Intelligence Agency's illegal mail-snooping against American citizens told Senate investigators yesterday that the operation was shut off in response to the Watergate scandal.

"It came to the attention of a lot of people in the light of Watergate that the government shouldn't be doing anything illegal," the retired CIA director of security, Howard Osborn, told the Senate intelligence committee.

Figures released by the committee yesterday showed that 28.3 million individual pieces of mail, most of them from Communist-bloc countries, were siphoned into the surveillance program during its years of operation from 1953 to 1973.

Of this number, nearly a quarter of a million had their contents photographed and scattered through the various agencies of the intelligence community.

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Watergate Reaction Ended Snooping

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Osborn and other CIA witnesses conceded that the yield from the surveillance operation was of little value to the CIA and that as long ago as 1961 a review showed "no tangible benefits" to the agency's Division of Soviet Affairs.

But instead of recommending that it be ended, the CIA inspector general's office proposed an "intensive evaluation" and the preparation of a cover story in the event that the mail-snooping operation leaked outside the agency. Thomas Abernathy, formerly of the CIA inspector general staff, testified.

Another review in 1969 found the operation to be of dubious value not only to the agency but to the rest of the intelligence community, and this time there was a recommendation that it be ended, according to former CIA official John Glennon.

Nonetheless, two years later, according to internal CIA documents released yesterday, CIA Director Richard Helms met with then-Attorney General John N. Mitchell and then Postmaster-General Winton Blount to brief them on the continued mail snooping.

Helms reported to CIA colleagues that "Mr. Mitchell fully concurred in the value of the operation and had no 'hangups' concerning it."

The memoranda reported that "Mr. Blount's reaction, too, was entirely positive regarding the operation and its continuation." Blount, the memo went on, "rejected a momentarily held thought of his to have someone review the legality of the operation as such a review would, of necessity, widen the circle of witting persons."

All the witnesses before the Senate committee yesterday acknowledged that they were always aware of the illegality of the mail surveillance.

In a speech Monday night to the Navy League, CIA Director William E. Colby denounced the resumption of the mail-snooping investigation with the strongest broadside he has yet delivered at Congress.

"We are about to have our fifth re-run of the great mail reading story," Colby complained. "Is Intelligence to become a mere theater for the amusement or amazement of the people rather than being preserved and protected for the benefit of all?"