

Secret Mail-Opening Program by FBI -- First Disclosure

Washington

FBI agents opened and photographed foreign and domestic mail beginning in 1968 and continued until possibly 1970, according to a source with direct knowledge of the secret operation.

The source said yesterday that the openings were centered in New York and Washington where they involved chiefly mail addressed to Soviet-type embassies and missions to the United Nations but occurred also in other cities, including San Francisco.

He said that the openings, known within the FBI as "Z-covers," were accomplished without the authority of judicial search warrants and were thus a violation of federal statutes prohibiting obstruction of the mails.

He added that the openings had been made with the assistance of "certain officials" of the Post Office (who knew what the FBI was doing).

Asked about the source's assertions, an FBI spokesman issued the following statement:

In connection with its foreign counterintelligence responsibilities, the FBI did engage in opening of mail until 1966, when former Director J. Edgar Hoover ordered the activity to be discontinued.

The motive behind it was solely to carry out FBI counterintelligence responsibilities in order to thwart espionage efforts directed against the United States by foreign powers.

No activities of this nature were undertaken by the FBI after 1966.

A spokesman for the Postal Service said his agency would have no comment on the report "at this time."

The source's account and the FBI's unusual confirmation of part of his account represent the first disclosure that, like the Central Intelligence Agency, the FBI also participated in the opening and photographing of parcels and letters it believed to be of some intelligence value.

"How could you get a warrant?" We asked rhetorically.

The cutoff date of 1966 given by the FBI spokesman for the mail-opening operation is the same year in which Clarence M. Kelley, the FBI director, asserted at a recent press conference that bureau agents had ceased committing burglaries to gain foreign intelligence information.

There have been reports, however, that although former Director J. Edgar Hoover apparently trimmed back the bureau's counterespionage effort in 1966, such break-ins continued on a less formal basis, and there are also indications that the mail openings persisted as well.

The source cited, for example, a copy of a letter that was stolen from the FBI's office in Media, Pa., in 1971 and subsequently made available to several newspapers.

That letter, dated Nov. 30, 1970, was from Thomas E. Ingerson, a Boy Scout leader from Moscow, Ida., to the Soviet embassy in Washington, and contained a request for information about a prospective visit to the USSR the following summer by his troop of six Explorer Scouts.

Asked how, if the mail-opening operation was halted in 1966, the 1970 letter found its way to the FBI's files, the bureau spokesman replied that his agency would

stand on its statement.

One well-informed source said he was virtually certain that the Idaho letter, which he said was "discussed quite a bit" within the bureau after it became public, had been obtained by the FBI as a result of a "Z-cover."

Another well-placed source said, however, that after 1966 the FBI continued to receive copies of correspondence produced by the CIA's mail interception program, which at that time was also centered in New York City and San Francisco.

Asked whether any attempt had been made to obtain search warrants in the "Z-covers" program, the source said that the senders and recipients of the letters had not been the subjects of a criminal investigation by the bureau.