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Does Interpol Threaten Your Privacy?

by Robert Walters

In novels of international intrigue, Interpol is an infallible, high-powered, worldwide police department whose agents roam the globe in search of master criminals. But to many veteran law officers who have dealt with Interpol, whose headquarters is in France, it is a slow-moving, archaic bureaucracy which seldom performs useful work.

Formally, the International Criminal Police Organization, known as Interpol, promotes cooperation and exchange of information among the police of its 120 member nations.

A senior law enforcement official in Washington contends that Interpol is really only "a sort of super telephone line." But a Senator who has been investigating the agency fears Interpol could pose a threat to the privacy of innocent American citizens.

Like most police organizations, Interpol has been reluctant to discuss its work in public. But this year a subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee has opened what is believed to be this country's first major probe of the agency since it was formed following World War II.

The subcommittee held one day of hearings last spring, but its chairman, Sen. Joseph M. Montoya (D., N. Mex.), says there is much more to come. "We're particularly interested in seeing



Sen. Joseph Montoya, conducting a probe of Interpol, the international police intelligence network, fears Americans' rights could be violated by careless use of information.

if the office in Washington was used for political purposes," he says. "We also need better guidelines governing the dissemination of information on American citizens to other countries."

An ally

Sharing Montoya's concern is Rep. Edward P. Beard (D., R.I.). He charges that Interpol "is a definite threat to the privacy and basic human rights of every man, woman and child in the United States," adding that both rightist and leftist dictatorships, as members of Interpol, have access to files on American citizens.

Montoya declined to provide details about an alleged intrusion of politics on Interpol's work, but an independent investigation has produced evidence that among the high-ranking officials in Interpol's Washington office as recently as 1974 was a man who had virtually no prior law enforcement experience and who was placed in that sensitive post through a reference from Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo, the Florida businessman and banker, an intimate of then-President Nixon.

That disclosure contradicts the claims of Interpol officials, who have insisted that its United States' "National Central Bureau" has operated under strict professional law enforcement standards.

Tortuous route

Those officials are reluctant to discuss the case of John Carlyle Herbert Bryant Jr., who came to Washington with six years' experience in selling cars and yachts in Virginia and Florida. Bryant's career with the federal government began with a \$1-a-year job at the White House, as an assistant to Ronald L. Ziegler, then Nixon's press secretary.

After only nine months in that post, Bryant landed a \$19,000-a-year job as a confidential assistant to the Interior Department's assistant secretary in charge of fish, wildlife and national parks. Less than two years later, Bryant's title there was changed to make him a "law enforcement" specialist. Although he did a few police-related studies while at Interior, people in the department remember him principally as a Rebozo protégé.

Using references from Ziegler and Rebozo, Bryant moved in early 1973 to the Washington bureau of Interpol. "He was just a guy working in the office. His duties were very limited," says Louis B. Sims, who now runs that office. "He didn't perform the duties of an agent. What he did was not very important." But the record shows that Bryant was

the third highest ranking official assigned to Interpol in this country and was earning a salary of more than \$24,000 until he left in early 1974.

The history of Interpol is a checkered one. Its predecessor was the International Criminal Police Commission, organized in 1923 with headquarters in Vienna. When Nazi forces occupied Austria in 1938, they took control of the agency and moved its headquarters to Berlin. Throughout World War II, there was virtually no contact between ICPC and non-Nazi nations.

Then, in 1946, many of the former member countries established a new organization, with headquarters in the Paris suburb of Saint-Cloud.

The organization is a confederation of the national police agencies from 120 countries of all political and ideological persuasions, including two of the more independent countries within the Soviet bloc, Romania and Yugoslavia. About 160 men and women from 18 of those nations work at Interpol headquarters, which has no authority to initiate investigations but serves instead as a central relay station and information bank for member nations.



Louis Sims, head of Interpol office in U.S., insists political data on Americans are not sent to Communist nations.

About two-thirds of the headquarters employees are clerical workers who maintain an elaborate set of criminal files, including a name index of more than a million cards, 200,000 reference folders, 100,000 fingerprint records, 20,000 dossiers on known criminals and a host of specialized files.

The remaining third of the employees at Interpol headquarters are profes-

sional law enforcement officers, but contrary to the portrayal in novels and movies, they do not travel around the world in pursuit of crooks. Instead, they coordinate the exchange of information about criminals, missing persons, stolen property, unidentified bodies and a variety of other items.

T-man in charge

The United States, like all member nations, has a "National Central Bureau" staffed by personnel from its own law enforcement agencies. Located in a suite of offices in the Treasury Department's headquarters in Washington, that operation is directed by Sims, who is on loan from the Secret Service.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation decided in the late 1950's that it did not want to act as the United States liaison agency, but in most other countries the national police organization—for example, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Canada and Scotland Yard in Britain—acts in that role.

The total United States budget for Interpol during the last fiscal year was almost \$550,000, including \$140,000 paid in annual dues. France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy each pay an identical amount, while other countries pay smaller dues scaled to their size and wealth.

No computers

Many United States law enforcement professionals are critical of Interpol on the grounds that it is too hidebound, rigid and formal. They also complain that it lacks any computer capability and therefore must hand-process all information, and that it poses security problems for those exchanging information.

During the first round of Senate hearings, Sims told Montoya that he checked "very closely" when he received an Interpol-relayed request from Romania or Yugoslavia, to determine whether those nations were serving as intermediaries for the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China or another non-member Communist nation.

Sims insists that he has found no evidence of that practice, but an American law enforcement officer based in Western Europe, and who asked that he not be identified, disagrees. "It's not just a hypothetical problem," he said, "I've been involved in cases where there was good reason to believe that political information was passed through Interpol and behind the Iron Curtain."

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PRIVACY CONTINUED

Other European-based agents cite different problems with Interpol. For example, the organization uses an antiquated Morse Code system to relay information to many countries, according to one source who said two or three weeks often elapsed between the issuance of an arrest warrant in one nation and the dissemination of that information to nearby countries. The International Association of Airport and Seaport Police, a competing group, last year denounced Interpol as "too big, too administration-minded, outdated and old-fashioned."

Another problem cited by some police officers who requested anonymity was that of "leaked" information. "If I'm dealing with Italian nationals smuggling German contraband into the United States, I'd far prefer to make contact with officers I trust in those countries," explained one American. "If I go through Interpol, I have no way of knowing who else will find out about the investigation."

Montoya and others are concerned about improper "leaks" of a different nature—the unauthorized dissemination of personal and political information about United States citizens neither accused nor suspected of criminal activity.

For example Interpol headquarters maintains files not only on known criminals but also on individuals "under suspicion" as well as complainants, victims and witnesses involved in criminal cases.

'Of current interest'

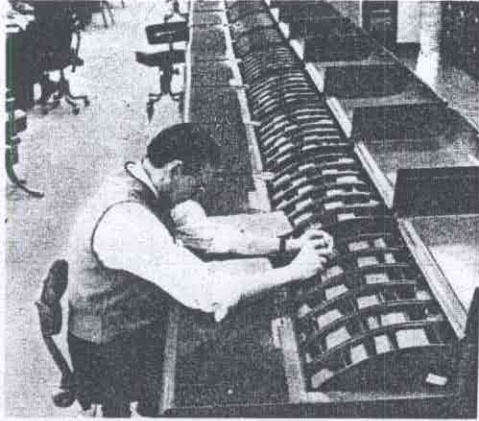
Similarly, the Washington bureau of Interpol has access to the Treasury Enforcement Communications System, which also contains information not only on convicted criminals and those facing formal charges but also on "suspected individuals . . . of current interest" to the Customs Service.

In addition, the TECS computer connects with the National Crime Information Center, the FBI's computerized data bank which has been criticized on the grounds that its arrest records do not always include the disposition of the case in instances where charges have been dismissed or rejected following court proceedings.

During the Senate hearings earlier this year, Sims insisted that all Interpol affiliates confine their information exchanges to criminal matters. "They strive not to pass other types of material through . . . Interpol channels," he told Montoya.

But Montoya is still not satisfied because there are no formal guidelines, in either Washington or France, governing the exchange of unverified accusations, raw intelligence data and other information potentially damaging to innocent citizens.

"The overriding question here is about the role of secret institutions in a free, democratic society," he said in a recent interview. "Interpol is not a value in itself to be protected and fostered at whatever expense to such a society. It exists only to serve that society, and it does not do so if, in any way, it undermines, threatens or ignores the rights of that society's citizens."



Interpol's French HQ: More than a million cards, plus dossiers and fingerprints, allow Interpol to keep tabs on the world's most notorious crooks.