

The Washington merry-go-round

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With LES WHITTEN

In outright violation of the law, military counterintelligence teams for years opened and read the mail of suspects.

This "flap and seal" operation, as it was called, rarely turned up any spies or criminals. It was used largely to snoop on servicemen who had complained about the Vietnam war.

Evidence that the Pentagon tampered with the mails has been offered to the select Senate committee which is investigating the excesses of the CIA, FBI and other government gumshoes.

The "flap and seal" term goes back to an earlier day when mail was surreptitiously steamed open and sealed again. But the Pentagon snoops pried into military mail by a more intricate technique called "rolling." Two prongs resembling knitting needles were used to slip letters from envelopes without breaking the flap seals.

Our sources told us, parenthetically, that the more resourceful Central Intelligence Agency has developed a machine that can read mail right through the envelopes. Electric waves penetrate the paper, scanning each layer and picking out the ink marks. Then the letter is reassembled electronically.

The counterintelligence teams, operating in strict secrecy, opened military mail both within the United States and at overseas bases. The practice was more blatant, however, outside the country.

"As soon as an American leaves the United States, the intelligence authorities think he loses all his constitutional rights," said one source.

The snooping became so widespread, military sources told us, that letters stacked up faster than they could be read. Tapes of bugged conversations also accumulated.

In most cases, the justification for the snooping was minimal, our sources say. Some people had their mail read simply because they had sensitive assignments.

Our sources recall the case, for example, of an American agent for the supersecret Army Security Agency. Its operations were being spied upon by an even more secret Army counterintelligence team.

The security man, bored with his work on the West German side of the Czechoslovakian border, sneaked across for a holiday in Prague. He played cat-and-mouse with the Czech authorities and had a brief, volcanic affair with a Czech beauty. Then he slipped back into West Germany.

But unknown to him, the counterintelligence sleuths were reading his mail. They found out about his romantic interlude when he received a letter from his Czech girl friend asking

when he planned to return to Prague.

The government's habit of prying into people's mail, in disregard of the law, is one of the abuses the Senate committee is supposed to investigate. But our sources say the leads often aren't followed up for lack of competent investigators.

In other cases, lawyers who came to the committee from federal agencies simply call their contacts in the intelligence services, obtain a denial of wrongdoing and call this an "investigation."

Footnote: A committee spokesman gave us this statement: "We are looking into mail opening, whether it involves the Defense Department, CIA, IRS or anybody else in government. We also regard the opening of U.S. mail overseas as a domestic matter." The Defense Department had no comment.

FORD'S FOLLY: The day before the unconditional surrender of Saigon, President Ford was still fighting for more military aid for the Saigon regime.

The confidential minutes of his April 29 meeting with congressional leaders show he refused to drop military aid from a bill to help the South Vietnamese.

House Democratic leader Tip O'Neill, according to the confidential minutes, called for a "clean bill," stripped of the military funds. Even House Republican leader John Rhodes agreed the bill should be sent "back to conference with instructions to delete military aid."

"Why not clean it up and remove the controversy?" O'Neill repeated.

"Tip," pleaded the President, "when you get to the appropriations, you can exclude the military fund use." In other words, the President wanted to hang on to the military aid until the last possible minute, leaving it up to the appropriations committees to knock it out if it were no longer needed.

Speaker Carl Albert warned that the military aid provision would create "controversy."

"Let's struggle to strike the most unified course of action," urged Rep. Phillip Burton, D-Calif., the House Democratic caucus chairman.

"The present bill," O'Neill persisted, "establishes a precedent which I'm opposed to."

"You can limit it in the appropriations," the President pleaded again.

"Maybe," suggested Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, "the precedent some fear would be a very useful precedent sometime in the Middle East."

The following day Saigon surrendered and the Communists inherited \$5 billion worth of U.S. military hardware. At least this was \$700 million less than the Communists would have taken over if President Ford had been given his way.