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The CIA on the CIA

IT IS EXTREMELY USEFUL to have now in the public domain the report which CIA Director William Colby hastily compiled and sent to the President two days after the New York Times published its account of the agency's domestic operations last Dec. 22. The Colby report adds little to what has since become publicly known about those operations. More to the point, a reading of it makes plain that little has since become publicly known that was not related at least in outline to the President by Mr. Colby on Dec. 24. In short, he obviously knew what had been going on at CIA. He was able to catalogue in only two days a long and complex history of activities that were either illegal, improper, or, at best, questionable.

It is instructive to ask how he could have been in a position to do this. The answer, evident from the Colby report, is that he and his predecessor as director, the present Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, had already made their own intensive and—we now can see—exhaustive inquiry into the CIA's questionable operations. In the Colby report there are published for the first time the internal documents establishing the corrective steps the agency had applied to itself some 18 months before word of those operations came to public attention. The first of these documents is Mr. Schlesinger's directive of May 9, 1973, ordering all employees (and inviting ex-employees) to report any current or past activities "which might be construed to be outside the legislative charter of this Agency." In a second document, dated Aug. 29, 1973, Mr. Colby issued "specific instructions" to deal with each of the "specific questionable activities which were reported as a result of the search made throughout the Agency." The 20-odd memos comprising these instructions—relating to domestic dissidents, drug experiments and all the rest—are in the Colby report.

The report does not—perhaps nothing can—end the rather tiresome and irrelevant argument over whether the CIA's domestic outrages were "massive," as the New York Times charged, or "few . . . exceptional to the thrust of the Agency's activities," as Mr. Colby replied. But the report does validate the much more important consideration that the Agency finally did bring into play a self-righting political gyroscope of its own. The clean-hands assurances of then-Director Richard Helms in 1972 are cited; the contradictions between these assurances and subsequent disclosures presumably help explain why the Colby report was so long in being released. But once the gyroscope did start working, under Mr. Schlesinger and Mr. Colby, it seems to have worked extremely well. Thus Mr. Colby could tell President Ford last December that "the Agency is not conducting activities comparable to those alleged" and that improper activities had been "fully terminated." Neither official disclosures nor leaks in the press have since given him cause to go back on that word.

All this, it seems to us, bears directly on the various inquiries still being conducted into the CIA. There is no doubt that new procedures for oversight, by other elements of the Executive branch and by the Congress, are essential. But there is also no doubt that no new system of oversight can replace the need for a sense of responsibility on the part of the people who lead the CIA, and those who work there. Quite the contrary: it is inconceivable that any system of CIA oversight conducted from the outside could ever be as effective as that practiced by conscientious professionals on the inside. If the supervision of the CIA cannot be left to the men and women of the agency, then neither can it be accomplished without them. The problem in seeing that the CIA does the job it is supposed to do, and only that, lies in finding the best ways for operators and overseers to cooperate with each other.