

Walter Pincus

Intelligence Priorities

"The growth stocks in the intelligence business," a member of the House Intelligence Committee said recently, "are economics, terrorism and narcotics." What he meant was that the U.S. intelligence community was changing its priority targets with the Vietnam war over and detente with China and the Soviet Union upon us.

As the danger to national security, seen by policymakers, shifts to events such as the Arab oil boycott, the Soviet grain deal

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or the creation of financial stress through international banking transfers, the intelligence agencies also shift the focus of their operations. The Central Intelligence Agency in the past year hired several outstanding economists. The Defense Intelligence Agency went up to Congress for a budget increase justified initially by "new demands," the first of which was "keeping alert to military threats and political and economic extortion as a result of the availability and control of natural resources."

Today intelligence agencies are being investigated for past illegal and unsavory operations that grew from an expanded view of their past targets. It thus is right that both Congress and the administration explore the dangers inherent in the current shift of intelligence targets.

Take the question of international oil. To keep abreast of all important aspects of this important natural resource, an intelligence agency would have to know not only the intimate details of government planning in Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example. It would also have to know all about the companies that explore, drill, pump and carry the oil. Many of these companies are owned in whole or in part by Americans or U.S.-based corporations. Many key employees, even of foreign corporations in the oil fields, are Americans.

If the U.S. intelligence agencies undertake their new target operations with the efficiency applied in the past, they inevitably will be gathering information on Americans, infiltrating American or multi-national corporations and intercepting cables and phone calls involving American businessmen. Such operations in the past, in pursuit of different information from different people,

debated for NSA, the agency which electronically intercepts international telephone and cable traffic. At present, NSA operates under authority of an executive order signed in 1955 by President Eisenhower. Unlike CIA and the FBI, no law as yet defines the extent of its overseas activities. U.S. law prohibits similar intercepts within the United States, even for national security reasons unless they have prior approval of the Attorney General. It would be almost impossible to establish such a realistic prior approval system for NSA's intercepts if they continue at their past rate.

NSA in 1973 stopped its interception of cables and calls involving Americans whose names were supplied it by CIA, the FBI and Secret Service. There was a recognition then that perhaps laws or at least Fourth Amendment rights were being violated. NSA, however, continued its own collection of material on targets it selected. If the target today is foreign oil, Americans are still being intercepted.

led to many of today's most difficult problems for CIA, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency.

Congress and the Ford administration will not be able to avoid meeting in coming months the question of American civil rights versus foreign intelligence needs. It will come up in the most precise terms when statutory language is proposed and