

Post
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'The Need for Intelligence'

WE DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION to a relatively brief and unobtrusive passage in the Rockefeller commission report which is reprinted elsewhere on this page today, Entitled Chapter 2, "The Need for Intelligence," it addresses a consideration that is easy to overlook in the rush to judge the CIA's misdeeds. The CIA's past excesses and misdeeds are critically important. But so is this country's need for an effective intelligence system. This need is not rooted in outdated and excessive apprehensions, but in an appreciation of contemporary reality: the world is complex and fast-changing, and some nations in it are hostile to our own. The proper purpose of the extraordinary purgative exercise now being directed at the CIA—of which the Rockefeller commission report is a part—is to ensure that, without assaulting citizens' rights, policy makers will continue to have the information and analysis they need to make decisions. This is basic.

Now, while a much greater proportion of this information could be made public and thereby shared and tested in timely fashion, it nonetheless remains necessary in our view that much of the collection and analysis of it must be done on a discreet, that is to say, secret, basis. We shape and execute domestic policy in the open, or we should, on the presumption that all of us have the nation's best interests at heart. But in the formulation of national security policy it would be foolish to ignore that some of those who would observe the policy-making process have interests in conflict with our own. That is the rationale for some secrecy in this area. For a newspaper to accept this rationale even while it does its daily darndest to unlock official secrets is merely a necessary fact of life in a society trying at once to be faithful to its highest domestic values, and to survive in an often-hostile international environment. Citizens must, we believe, accept both requirements as legitimate and honorable.

It must be understood that nations—and, especially, but not exclusively, those which are our adversaries—commonly try to penetrate or confound each other's intelligence systems. This makes it essential to protect one's own system by erecting defenses that come under the name of counter-intelligence. The Rockefeller commission report shows the danger here: some activities undertaken in the name or form of counter-intelligence led the CIA outside its charter and outside the law. It is wrong, however, to label any effort to establish guidelines for counter-intelligence procedures—procedures which unavoidably take place on domestic soil—as a step which legitimizes domestic "spying." Hard discussion is needed on the report's proposals that the CIA be permitted to collect information on employees and, in coordination with the FBI, on persons posing a "clear threat" to its facilities or personnel and on "persons suspected of espionage or other illegal activities relating to foreign intelligence." This discussion must proceed from a double awareness of past pitfalls and continuing counter-intelligence needs.

The commission notes, for instance, that some Communist countries "can" monitor Americans' private phone conversations by the thousand; this makes some Americans "potentially subject" to blackmail. That a foreign power "can" tap an American's phone does not excuse the CIA from actually having done so. It is one of this country's proudest boasts that, at its best, it holds itself to standards that it expects no other country to meet. But it would be frivolous to proceed from there to conclude that the large intelligence effort which, say, Russia has mounted in this country can safely be ignored. In the drive to ensure that the CIA is cleansed of its excesses and improprieties, its legitimate functions must not be impaired.