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The Rockefeller Report on the CIA

THE VALUE of the Rockefeller commission report on the CIA is that it puts on record what appears at first reading to be a full and reliable account of the agency's "activities within the United States"—otherwise known as "illegal domestic spying." All previous accounts have been either journalistic and therefore impressionistic, or official and therefore suspect. This one had the twin advantages of being written with good access to official sources and with a saving awareness that congressional investigators would shortly be pounding down the same path. Not much of the serious detail is new but it becomes now more authentic for having been set in a comprehensive frame.

To those who believe that any CIA venture into improper or illegal domestic activity is permanently defiling, this report's listing of surveillance of domestic dissidents, mail intercepts and the like will confirm the conviction that the United States came close, and might again come close, to being devoured by the security apparatus it had devised to ward off external threat. Others will be appalled that a great nation's security agency had been subjected to this sort of humiliating and possibly crippling scrutiny at a moment when external dangers remain very great.

The Rockefeller commission's view, reflected both in its revelations and judgments of past acts and in its prescriptions for future policy, is quite different. The commission recognizes that national security and individual rights can tug in opposite directions. It makes plain that the CIA, sometimes in response to presidential pushing and sometimes out of its own carelessness or zeal, has time and again in the past engaged in improper or illegal conduct. The commission accepts, however, that the perceptions of external threat which guided the CIA in earlier years are no longer so relevant

and that it has now become possible from a security viewpoint, just as it is necessary in relation to citizens' rights, to impose more effective oversight and stricter controls over the CIA.

So, far from being a "whitewash" the Rockefeller commission report is a clear summons to professionalism in intelligence and to respect for Americans' rights. This is the thrust of its several dozen recommendations, most of them calling for adjustments in legislation or in administrative or congressional procedure. While we are hardly prepared to endorse every single one of them, we do endorse the positive and mature way in which the commission went about its work.

President Ford's decision to keep secret the commission's uncompleted study of allegations of foreign assassinations, and to pass those materials on to congressional investigators, is reasonable. Mr. Rockefeller did him no favor by his clumsy juggling of the assassination materials over the weekend. But the important consideration is that the allegations are rigorously pursued. The Rockefeller commission's original mission did not include an investigation of alleged assassination plots; that was an afterthought. For that Commission to release its "incomplete" study of the matter now would risk raising more questions that it would answer. It now falls to the select Senate committee on the CIA to run down the allegations as far as possible. Just how far that may be we are not prepared to say. Any president who may have contemplated the murder of a foreign leader would no doubt have taken pains to keep his own fingerprints off the enterprise. The assassination story inquiry needs more time. The public has the Rockefeller Commission's report to consider while it waits.