

Spying for Liberty

By Tom Wicker

The evidence appears to be growing that the Central Intelligence Agency violated its charter and broke the law by conducting domestic surveillance within the United States. Since that charge was made in The New York Times Dec. 22, President Ford has said that he had some of the same information on which The Times story was based, and:

¶Four C.I.A. counterintelligence officials have resigned, obviously with the concurrence of William E. Colby, director of the agency, and one of them, James Angleton, said of The Times story, "there's something to it."

¶Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin said on ABC's "Issues and Answers" that he had independent confirmation of The Times story.

¶A former C.I.A. agent confided some elaborate details of domestic spying to Seymour Hersh of The Times.

¶Richard Helms, C.I.A. director at the time of the alleged domestic spying, issued a "categorical" denial that, in fact, appeared to depend heavily on how the word "illegal" might be defined and on whether the spying was aimed specifically at "antiwar activists or dissidents."

Watergate fans will remember that these seemingly insignificant semantic usages are not unimportant. A political "dissident" who was also suspected by the C.I.A. of being in touch with a foreign power might be classified as a security threat, not a dissident; and "illegal" spying might not seem at all illegal to the security mentality—for example, spying on an American "antiwar activist" if it was thought that this might be part of the agency's need to keep a counterintelligence check on its own agents.

Even granting such "gray areas" and the obvious difficulties of knowing precisely who is a "dissident" and who is a paid foreign agent, it may well be asked why the C.I.A. would commit — in Representative Lucien Nedzi's phrase—"illegalities in terms of exceeding their charter." Why not, instead, confide the problems to a Congress that has usually been friendly and ask for appropriate legislation?

One reason no doubt was the fact that the Federal Bureau of Investigation regards itself as having the official counterintelligence mission. Especially during the lifetime of the formidable J. Edgar Hoover, had the C.I.A. sought either to cut into the F.B.I.'s turf or to imply that the F.B.I. was not doing the job, Mr. Hoover's wrath and vengeance would have been terrible to behold, certainly not to have been lightly courted.

More important, however, is the kind of personal outlook and world view that—understandably enough—is al-

most inevitably developed by those who spend their lives in the national security field. This security mentality produces, first, a kind of tunnel vision—a narrow and constant focus on the most frightening and threatening aspect of international relations. Mr. Hoover, for example, singlehandedly obstructed for many years an increase in the number of Soviet consulates in this country; he believed they increased the Soviet intelligence threat, and he seemed to have no sense at all of any need for improving Soviet-American relations.

The very nature of the job also tends to exaggerate the threat, hence the response. One who regards himself as responsible for something as cosmic as the national security is likely to assume the worst case. If it is possible that the Soviets will build a hundred missiles rather than ten, better assume

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the hundred, and build 200; if it is possible that a black radical is being paid by the Algerians, through whom the Soviets may control or exploit him, better keep him under surveillance, however "illegal" it might be on paper.

Such a world, moreover, especially when most of its activities are carried out in secrecy, is bound to create a heightened sense of power. Who can do "wrong" in protecting an innocent nation from threats it does not recognize? The legitimating of "cover"—acting secretly—makes it unlikely that anyone will be caught, anyway. As the Nixon White House all too well demonstrated, the responsibility for "national security" and the power to act in secret can be a heady and corrupting combination.

The national security mentality also seems to believe that the nation can be something different from what it does. Governments can be toppled, foreign officials assassinated or subverted, armies recruited and launched on invasions, all clandestinely and under cover of lies—but none of that has anything to do with what the country is, or what it stands for. These "black" deeds, in fact, permit the United States, in a hostile world, to remain the bastion of freedom, the home of democracy, an open society standing for honor and decency among nations.

"There's a very real need for concern" about foreign intelligence, said one of the C.I.A. officials who retired, "but I don't think people are going to heed it. I don't think they want to heed it." So Big Brother had to do the job for them, through secret and illegal spying. By the curious double standard of the security world, that was not a threat to American liberty but a means of protecting it.