

When the Central Intelligence Agency was caught in the web of Watergate, a thorough scrutiny of its past and definition of its future mandate became inevitable and essential. Fragmentary disclosures concerning the agency's involvement in highly dubious enterprises abroad and illegal activities at home have raised questions about the very nature of a secret intelligence apparatus in a free society.

Until those questions are satisfactorily answered by the separate inquiries now being conducted by the Rockefeller panel and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the C.I.A.'s effectiveness will remain in jeopardy. Necessary reforms are endangered both by those who believe that any look behind the agency's veil of secrecy is a threat to national security and by those who would simply abolish all covert intelligence. Both approaches seem to us to be incompatible with the nation's safety.

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It is relatively easy to define certain activities as intolerable under any circumstances. Whenever the C.I.A. engaged in surveillance or infiltration of domestic dissident movements and other acts of domestic political counter-intelligence, it violated its own founding statute, broke the law and undermined the Constitution.

Similarly inexcusable would be any alleged C.I.A. involvement in political assassination plots abroad. No real or imagined American interests could ever condone participation or complicity in such acts of international lawlessness by any agency that represented a nation dedicated to government under law.

While unequivocal agreement on such basic issues is essential, it would be naive to downgrade the importance of an effective intelligence agency. To deprive a major world power of up-to-date information concerning its potential adversaries would increase rather than diminish the risk of international instability and conflict. The United States cannot afford to walk blindly through a world divided by clashing interests, aspirations and suspicions.

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While it is undoubtedly true that most intelligence of genuine value comes from overt information-gathering activities—except for code-breaking, which is not conducted by the C.I.A. anyway—there still is a place for secret intelligence collection. There may even be a place for some forms of secret intelligence operation, though this is at best a gray area that ought to be subject to far stricter controls than has heretofore been the case.

But when the interpretation of intelligence and the execution of operations merge into determination of political policy—there is the point at which the line has been crossed and the powers and authority of the intelligence organization must be summarily curbed. It is essential that there be no opportunity for delegation of political decision-making power either to the C.I.A. or to the Pentagon, as was evidently the case in the Bay of Pigs debacle. Under such conditions, an intelligence agency ceases to be the eyes and ears of the nation's foreign policy shapers and assumes instead an operational policy-making momentum of its own.

Such a course is highly dangerous to and in fact incompatible with a free society. The deeper purpose of the present inquiries therefore must not be to destroy the appropriate role of the C.I.A., but to ensure that the secret intelligence organization is brought into thorough subservience to American law and principle both at home and abroad.