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The CIA's Secret Mail Monitoring

Washington

For nearly 20 years, Central Intelligence Agency officials hid from postal authorities the fact they were opening thousands of letters sent to or mailed by American citizens, the Rockefeller Commission report disclosed yesterday.

The commission concluded that the mail-opening program of the CIA was illegal and also violated individual rights guaranteed by the First and Fourth Amendments to the Constitution. The program ended in 1973.

In 1952, the CIA, with the cooperation of postal officials, began examining mail flowing through the New York post office to and from the Soviet Union, the commission reported.

Postal officials were told that "the expressed intention was to examine the outside of envelopes only."

The commission said that within a year and without knowledge of the Post Office Department "selected items of the mail were already being opened and contents analyzed by the CIA."

During the last full year of the New York mail project, CIA officials handled 4,350,000 items, examined the outside of 2.3 million, photographed the outside of 33,000 and opened 8700.

The intelligence value of the mail project is not easy to assess," the commission said. CIA officials said the project provided "technical communications intelligence on such matters as secret writing, censorship techniques and the like."

However, in terminating the project, then-CIA Director James R. Schlesinger said that the intelligence derived from the mail intercept was not worth the risk of continued CIA involvement, according to the commission.

The commission also emphasized that CIA officials were fully aware of the illegality of opening mail.

Similar CIA mail programs were run in Hawaii for about one year in the mid 1950s; in the San Francisco Bay Area for several weeks in 1970 and 1971, and in New Orleans for three weeks in 1957.

All CIA mail monitoring ended in 1973, according to the commission. William J. Cotter, a former CIA counter-intelligence official who had become chief postal inspector, demanded that year that the agency obtain high-level approval for continuation of the New York operation, the only one still functioning.

Cotter became chief postal inspector on April 7, 1969.

He had been with the CIA

since 1951, and had been deputy chief of the office which coordinated the New York mail surveillance project. The commission noted that Helms had recommended Cotter as qualified for the postal job.

The commission said that in its search of CIA records of the mail surveillance "no evidence could be found that any briefing of any president occurred."

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