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Opening Of Mail Laid to FBI

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The FBI opened foreign mail without obtaining legally required search warrants until 1966, an FBI source said yesterday.

An FBI spokesman, while declining to say if search warrants were obtained, confirmed a report in yesterday's editions of The New York Times that the FBI opened mail in connection with the bureau's counter-espionage responsibilities.

"The motive behind it was solely to carry out FBI counterintelligence responsibilities in order to thwart espionage efforts directed against the U.S. by foreign powers," the spokesman said.

"No activities of this nature were undertaken by the FBI after 1966," the spokesman added.

The Rockefeller Commission report found the CIA illegally opened mail until 1973, but the FBI's admission was the first indication that the bureau had engaged in similar activities.

The FBI has previously admitted to carrying out burglaries in cases affecting national security until 1966, with some break-ins conducted after that date in exceptional cases.

A second FBI source said copies of the mail that was targeted for FBI surveillance were delivered to an unmarked FBI building a block from the Capitol at 215 Pennsylvania Ave. SE.

There, the source said, the mail was read and, if necessary, translated.

The facility is known within the FBI as the translation section.

The source said most of the mail was personal correspondence between U.S. residents and family members or friends living in the Soviet Union or China.