

SFChronicle  
**Postmasters Kept in Dark** MAY 21 1975

# The CIA Mail Probe

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Washington Post

Washington

Less than four weeks after he took over as postmaster general this year, Benjamin Franklin Bailar wrote a letter to the CIA emphasizing that it was his job to guard the sanctity of the U.S. mail.

Accordingly, he demanded that CIA Director William E. Colby give his personal pledge that the CIA would never again surreptitiously open the letter of American citizens on the way to their destinations.

Colby replied, in a note dated March 13 that has yet to be made public, that the CIA had no intention of reinstating such projects, but congressional investigators remain skeptical.

According to testimony before the House subcommittee on postal facilities, the CIA not only illegally intercepted and copied first-class mail over a 20-year period, but did so without confiding in the postmasters general or the chief postal inspectors of the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administration.

Thousands of letters of first-class mail between the United States and the Soviet Union were secretly opened by CIA agents stationed at New York's La Guardia Airport and later at Kennedy International since the mid

## Rocket Problem Dooms a Satellite

Cape Canaveral

A \$57 million communications satellite mission launched here yesterday failed because of a power problem in the Titan rocket, Air Force officials said.

They reported that the two 1200-pound military satellites and the Titan rocket were rolling and tumbling in orbit and were not expected to remain in space very long.

This was the first failure

of a rocket stage in the Titan III-C for ten years.

In 1965 two satellite missions failed because of problems in the third stage of the launching rocket, the same stage where the trouble developed yesterday.

Had the satellites gone into a proper orbit, they would have completed a worldwide communications network for U.S. military forces.

Reuters

'50s. However, President Eisenhower's postmaster general, the late Arthur E. Summerfield, apparently was told only that the CIA was going to conduct a "mail cover" operation to record the information on wrappings and envelopes. Almost all of Summerfield's successors were told nothing at all.

Hundreds of other letters airmailed from Communist China were intercepted by CIA agents in 1969-71 in violation of an express understanding with the U.S. Postal Service, which once again had authorized only a "mail

cover." The letters, The Washington Post has reported, were surreptitiously plucked out of the mail-stream despite surveillance by postal inspectors who were assigned to work alongside the CIA agents to prevent such tampering.

The CIA reportedly obtained access to Cuban mail passing through New Orleans without any notice to postal authorities, who were told only that the Postal Service was "not involved" in this operation in any way. According to one source, it may have involved so-called "transit mail," which simply passes through the United States on its way from one foreign country to another. CIA Director Colby has said in congressional testimony, "International mail passing through a U.A. port was opened in August, 1957," but he offered no other details.

Federal law prohibits the opening of first-class mail without a search warrant, and Colby himself has acknowledged publicly that the CIA's mail interceptions were "illegal." But the evidence involving the 20-year Russian mail project — which was not halted until February, 1973, in the midst of the Watergate scandal — suggests that, until recently at least, any CIA undertaking carried with it a bureaucratic momentum that brooked no questions.

According to chief U.S. postal inspector William J. Cotter, the CIA first expressed interest in incoming and outgoing Soviet mail in the closing days of the Truman administration and finally got approval from Summerfield, "presumably for mail cover," in 1953 after Mr. Eisenhower became president.

Sometime later, however, Cotter told the House subcommittee headed by Representative Charles Wilson (Dem-Calif.), the CIA went one step further and secretly began opening the mail without the approval of post-felt that it were illegal, you could have stopped it?"

Day replied, "No, I don't, because of the very reason I state . . . The CIA had its own lines of authority, I had my lines of authority and I didn't feel that I needed to al authorities, much less the courts.

A retired postal clerk who sorted the Russian mail for



CIA agents at the New York airports for 16 years, Peter F. McAuley, testified that he never knew for certain they were opening letters and didn't suspect it "until very late" in his career. He said he got the hunch one day when he spotted an envelope he thought he had seen the day before and remarked about that to the CIA agents he was helping.

"They smiled, the two men smiled, and that was the end of that," McAuley told the House subcommittee. "Nobody told me anything . . . I assisted them, that's all."

As Cotter has explained it, the CIA operatives apparently would slip selected letters into their pockets when no one was looking, make copies later, and return the originals into the mail flow the next day.

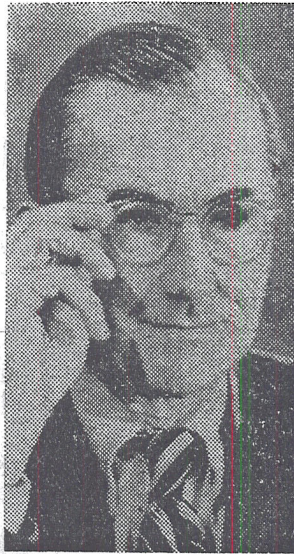
If clerk McAuley was kept in the dark, so apparently were top officials of the Postal Inspection Service whose job it is to protect the mail, and investigate all violations of postal law. Interviewed recently by postal authorities, the chief postal inspector under Summerfield, David H. Stephens reportedly stated he had no idea that the CIA was opening letters.

With the advent of the Kennedy administration in 1961, then-CIA Director Allen Dulles offered to brief the new Postmaster General J. Edward Day, "about something that was very secret." Day said he didn't want to hear about it—whatever it was—so that no fingers would be pointed at him in case the secret ever leaked.

In a recent hearing, Wilson asked him, "Do you wish now that you had taken the briefing and learned more about it so that if you get into their affairs—and I'm very glad I didn't."

Perhaps because of Day's attitude, the CIA apparently never approached the next three postmasters general—John Gronouski, Lawrence F. O'Brien and Marvin Watson—about the project.

"I had never heard of the



WILLIAM COLBY  
CIA director

CIA operation," O'Brien told the subcommittee this month. If the CIA had asked him about opening mail, he added, "I would (have) come close to throwing them out the window."

As it turned out, Cotter was the first chief postal inspector who knew what was going on and then only because he had been a top-ranking CIA agent in New York when the project was started. He was appointed chief postal inspector in April, 1969, the first outsider to get the job since the Post Office was set up under the original Benjamin Franklin.

The CIA finally halted it in February, 1973, after renewed insistence by Cotter, who again told the agency to get the approval of "the highest people in government" or drop it.

The existence of the project, however, remained a secret until CIA Director Colby alluded to it in congressional testimony in January and February, along with veiled references to the San Francisco and New Orleans mail openings.

Bailar, who became postmaster general in mid-February, asked Colby several weeks later for "your personal assurance that there are no more of these types of operations presently going on, planned, or ever to be undertaken."

According to informed sources, however, Colby's reply appears to fall short of the "ironclad assurance" that the Wilson subcommittee has demanded.

"You could read some loopholes into it," one source said of the CIA director's response. According to a CIA spokesman, the agency still wants to reserve the right to conduct mail covers.