

Domestic Spy Corps?

A former Army intelligence agent has come forward with so grave a charge of military meddling in civilian politics that it requires thorough Congressional investigation despite a somewhat qualified official denial. The accusation taken very seriously by Senator Ervin of North Carolina—a strongly conservative defender of civil liberties—is that in Illinois, Army agents carried out assignments to spy on Adlai E. Stevenson 3d in the course of his senatorial campaign, on former Gov. Otto Kerner, on Representative Abner J. Mikva and on 800 other civilians as well. According to Senator Ervin, "Anyone who in the Army's definition was 'left of center' was a prospective candidate for political surveillance."

Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor has called the specific allegations as to the political figures "without foundation in fact," but he has said nothing about the 800 other civilians. President Nixon's press secretary says that no such spying is "going on in any way at this time," nor will it, so long as Mr. Nixon is President—thus leaving the possible implication that it may have gone on in the recent past.

A certain evasiveness on the part of the military in matters of this sort is not without precedent. It is precisely what occurred when the Pentagon announced last spring, following a wave of protest, that it had eliminated a computerized bank of information on millions of American citizens, then proceeded quietly to file away microfilm containing virtually the same data.

In that affair, soon to be aired further before a Federal Court of Appeals, Senator Ervin put the question in perspective. While the Army had a duty to know all about the physical conditions and resources of an area in which civil disturbances might occur, it was not its business "to predict trends and reactions by keeping track of the thoughts and actions of Americans exercising First Amendment freedoms." Pertinent information on potential subversion has been entrusted by law to the F.B.I., which is responsible at least in theory to the Department of Justice.

If any Army officers turn out to have indeed countenanced the kind of unconstitutional interference with the American system of political freedom as suggested in the allegations, it is essential that they be severely disciplined. Senator Ervin, an effective defender of the Constitution, can be counted on to follow this inquiry through until it is resolved.