

Tom Wicker

Snooping on The Snoopers

Washington

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LAIRD has ordered a comprehensive review by February 1 of military intelligence activities. His order was directed at ending unconstitutional domestic surveillance programs, as well as improving intelligence operations abroad; but it may not go far enough to achieve either purpose.

Laird appears to have ordered what is known in bureaucratic jargon as an "in-house review." It will be conducted, that is, within the department — by the Secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force, by Lt. Gen. Donald V. Bennett, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and by Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert F. Froehlke. The latter official already has made one study of defense intelligence activities, at Laird's direction. Stanley Resor, the Secretary of the Army, has also been forced to look into Army surveillance programs.



It is no slur on any of these gentlemen, nor is it a slap at their or Laird's good intentions, to say that defense officials investigating the Defense Department are not necessarily the most effective instruments with which to root out improper, ineffective or duplicating Defense Department activities. Moreover, even if they did the job thoroughly, they would not be as convincing to critics and skeptics as would non-interested investigators. The American public is not much impressed, any more, with "self-policing" or "self regulation."

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THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT has reported that as a result of an earlier controversy about domestic surveillance by the Army, three computer data banks of investigative reports had been destroyed at Fort Holabird, Md., Fort Monroe, Va., and Fort Hood, Tex.

But if the Army had the effrontery to compile that kind of material, and if those three data banks could be established basically without the knowledge of civilian officials (to say nothing of the widespread surveillance activities that provided the data), there is surely some justification for wondering if there is not even more to be uncovered — or, at the least, whether every vestige of this disreputable operation has been eliminated, and not started again.

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THAT IS WHY LAIRD and President Nixon would be wise to seek some qualified and credible outside assistance in investigating these allegations and stopping this dangerous intrusion of the armed forces into political life. Blueribbon commissions are appointed for all sorts of other purposes — recently resulting, for instance, in the establishment of the Office of Management and Budget.

Such an outside group need not be concerned with protecting associates, concealing past errors and improprieties, sustaining reputations, glossing over its own administrative deficiencies, or any of the numerous ills to which the in-house review is lamentably prone.

Moreover, an outside investigation and review is far likelier to look with a fresh eye at things bureaucracy takes for granted—to ask why, to challenge routine, to look into dusty corners. Sometimes, lack of expertise can provide the sharpest analysis.

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