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Conus Intel Unleashed

By TOM WICKER

Some people are not opposed to wiretapping because they believe only criminals and subversives will be tapped, and anyway they think they have nothing to hide.

Some people do not believe in the Fifth Amendment because they are law-abiding and think that only criminals need protection against incriminating themselves out of their own mouths.

Some people are all for making it easier to arrest and convict other people, because they are convinced that only those who commit crimes will be affected, and they do not themselves intend to commit any crimes.

But a little breach of safeguarded liberty is like a hole in a dike—it will rapidly let in the flood.

Seldom was that truth more graphically demonstrated than in a chilling article by Richard Halloran* in this newspaper, detailing the incredible mushroom growth of the Army's "Conus Intel" surveillance program designed to help the military cope with urban disorders.

It would be hard to dispute the impulse that led the Army into Conus Intel. When Federal troops had to quell major disorders in Newark and Detroit in 1967, their commanders found that they had little if any information on these cities—not even adequate maps—much less about those who might have been causing the disturbances.

Nor is there anything wrong with

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the basic information the Army then began compiling — aircraft landing places, bivouac locations, hospital facilities, police installations and the like. There is even a case to be made for putting together lists of known agitators and ringleaders, if there were such people, but only with the greatest care and concern, and the most thorough scrutiny of the names.

But the high civilian and military officials who ordered this program apparently failed to make clear its limited intent, exercised only the most lax control over the execution of their policy, and did not at first perceive either its grave dangers or the extent to which the monster began to run wild.

What happened is a classic example of powerful bureaucracy set loose from necessary restraints. First, each descending level of authority expanded zealously on its orders and scope of responsibility in an effort to please the level just above.

Then the limited and probably justified step that had been taken into political surveillance of American citizens rapidly became a long leap; with its manpower and its mission and the zeal of its operatives, the Army was quickly scraping up every bit of information it could get on anyone remotely connected with political activity.

Once the Army's dossiers, blacklists, political characterizations and other

data on thousands of persons and groups began to mount up, a demand for such material began to come in from other government agencies and law-enforcement units at every level. Technology then had to be brought into play to service these demands, and computerized data banks were established.

Thus a program originated by honorable men for supportable motives became, in almost no time, a vast apparatus for political surveillance of the American people. And when the misgivings of its own officials, as well as some public disclosures, led the Army to try to check the monster, it was more easily ordered than done. The Justice Department, incredibly, protested; it wanted all those surveillance reports Army manpower was bringing in, under cover of warding off domestic disturbances.

Moreover, dissemination had been so widespread that even if the Army, under public and Congressional pressure, has now destroyed most of its surveillance reports, no one can ever be sure who might have copies, or who saw them and made other copies, or what entries in other personnel files and data banks and credit reports were made as a result.

And even those who have never marched in protest or made a radical speech or joined a militant group (none of which is a crime) can hardly be sure that their names never appeared in a Conus Intel report. In the grab-bag surveillance business, biased, erroneous and malicious information is likely to go in with all the rest.

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