



# Checking the Mail

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**T**HE MAIN REASON the Central Intelligence Agency monitored the mails between the United States and the Chinese mainland, according to secret testimony, was to pick up clues about China's atomic progress.

Testifying behind closed congressional doors, the former chief postal inspector, William Cotter, confirmed our earlier report that China mail was opened in the San Francisco Post Office. The purpose, however, has been kept secret until now.

Cotter's explanation didn't satisfy Representative Charles Wilson, (Dem-Calif.) who presided over the closed session.

"You said that the San Francisco project involved determining the point of development of atomic energy in China," pressed Wilson. "Now, how can a mail cover program determine such information?"

"You have got me, sir," Cotter confessed. He suggested that maybe "there could be some radioactivity on the exterior of the letter." But, of course, this wouldn't explain why the CIA had to open the envelopes.

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**C**OTTER SAID he had approved the illegal mail openings because he assumed the operation had been approved by the President as a national security necessity.

The CIA has now informed the Postmaster General, added Cotter, that spies are no longer meddling with the mails.

"We don't have any national security problems anymore?" asked Wilson.

"In this area, I don't think so," said Cotter. He referred to the practice during the Nixon years of watching the mail of suspected "subversives." Nowadays, he said, "it is a different world, I think."

"I hope so," said Wilson.

The secret testimony reveals, however, that it is still easy for a government agency to arrange a mail cover on almost any citizen. The agency isn't permitted to open the mail but can keep a record of who is writing to whom.

In 1973-74, about 8500 Americans had their mail checked in this manner. The FBI conducts the most mail covers, with the Internal Revenue Service next. State and local officials can also request mail covers. All they need is approval from any one of 73 authorized postal officials.

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**C**CHEAP LUNCH: The \$2 billion-a-year federal school lunch program now provides subsidized lunches for 26 million children in 90,000 public and private schools.

The original idea was to give hearty meals to the poor. But among the thousands of private schools getting money under the program are such ritzy institutions as Choate School, Phillips Exeter and Phillips Academy.

At the Agriculture Department a spokesman explained that even the most fashionable schools have scholarship students who are needy.