

By Tom Wicker

President Ford has assured the American people that the Central Intelligence Agency is not now conducting domestic political surveillances in violation of its charter, and that no such activities will be tolerated while he is President.

But how does he know what the C.I.A. is doing? How can he be sure what it might do next year or if its officials are telling him the truth now? Even if they are, suppose a new President pays little attention to the C.I.A. after 1976? Mr. Ford is undoubtedly sincere, but in this case his assurances—the assurances of any President—are just not good enough.

Congress, the White House, the American people have been assured repeatedly that the C.I.A., barred by law from any operations within the United States, does not conduct such operations. Now The New York Times has published strong allegations that the agency did just that—and these allegations are supported by Mr. Ford's refusal to say that internal surveillances had not been carried on in the past, and by his concession that he had some of the information in The Times' article before it appeared.

Even William E. Colby, the director of the C.I.A., is reported to have given some confirmation of these charges in an off-record appearance at the Council on Foreign Relations. At the least, therefore, a thoroughgoing investigation of the C.I.A. must at long last be carried out. For if Mr. Ford's assurances are not good enough, C.I.A. denials are little more than a joke, and Congressional "oversight" has been shown time and again to be not only insufficient but usually cooperative with the agency supposedly overseeing. And if these charges prove true, the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, appointed by the President to keep an eye on the agency, as well as the Forty Committee, which is supposed to give it policy direction within the Administration, have either been duped or coopted or both.

It appears possible, incredibly enough, that some of the agency's highest officials, holding the responsibility to control its actions, did not know what was going on. This is because a sort of C.I.A.-within-the-C.I.A. was in operation—the Counterintelligence Department, which allegedly carried out the domestic operations through its own unit-within-a-unit, the supersecret special operations branch of Counterintelligence, or "the deep snow section," as one official called it. Since

the Counterintelligence Department has the responsibility of checking on C.I.A. agents themselves to make sure they have not defected or become double agents, it is clearly hazardous for anyone within the agency to challenge or antagonize counterintelligence.

This many-chambered house of deceit, fear, power and intrigue must no longer be permitted to flourish in its own darkness. It is especially chilling to read, for example, that when James Schlesinger, briefly the agency's director, tried to halt all questionable counterintelligence activities in 1973, and cut back C.I.A. personnel, agency security officials increased the number of his personal bodyguards. If that is true, and if they felt they had reason, every nightmare vision of a shadowy C.I.A. menace will seem the more rational.

But how is the truth to be established? The agency can hardly be trusted to investigate and purge itself; and even if Mr. Colby did the job honestly and ruthlessly, the public could not be expected to accept one more in-house assurance of clean hands. Earlier Congressional and Presidential inquiries, moreover, have usu-

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ally become dependent on the agency for information and have wound up in its pocket and pleading its cause.

If President Ford means what he says, he needs the truth more than anyone else. He might come closest to getting it if he appointed a special prosecutor, with full subpoena powers and security clearance, independence such as that granted Leon Jaworski in the Watergate matter, and the mission of investigating every violation of law and its own charter of which any C.I.A. official may have been guilty.

Congress could provide legislation to give such a prosecutor an irrefutable legal base. But if Mr. Ford merely accepts C.I.A. assurances instead of taking action to get at the truth, Congress ought to legislate its own special prosecutor. Either way, Congress could also begin the necessary studies of the agency's quarter-century of existence to see if it should be reshaped, reduced or abolished.

The C.I.A. has functioned too long as its own watchdog, perhaps its own law. Radical surgery was recently needed to remove the cancer that threatened the Presidency; and radical surgery will be needed just as desperately if a cancer called C.I.A. threatens American democracy itself.