

James J. Kilpatrick

The Campaign to Destroy the CIA

A CAMPAIGN IS under way, waged in the pious name of "the people's right to know," to destroy the Central Intelligence Agency. In the name of our national security, the campaign cannot be allowed to succeed.

Let me insert a personal word. I have been in the news business for 34 years, come March, and I suppose I am as dedicated as any of my colleagues to this elemental proposition — that the function of a newspaper is to print the news, not to suppress it. This is the rule we live by. Several years ago, swallowing my distaste at the source, I defended the decision of the New York Times to publish Daniel Ellsberg's purloined Pentagon Papers. The harm to national security in that instance struck me as minimal.



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A N ENTIRELY DIFFERENT situation is presented, or so it seems to me, by the Times' spread-eagled expose of December 22. This much could be said for the Pentagon Papers story: It was crammed with facts. By contrast, Seymour Hersh's opening story on the CIA was mostly mush.

What the Times charged, in essence, was that "according to well-placed government sources, the CIA, in direct violation of its charter, had mounted massive, illegal intelligence operations during the Nixon administration against members of the anti-war movement and other dissident groups inside the United States." According to Hersh, the CIA established intelligence files on "at least 10,000 American citizens."

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W ITH PUBLICATION of the Times' piece of December 22, a dam broke. Other newspapers, notably the Washington Post, rushed into print with thousands of words of revelation, gossip, and hard-breathing disclosures. A dozen members of Congress, seeing a glorious chance for publicity in the dull season before Congress convenes, leaped forward with demands for investigations and oversight. President Ford, yielding to these picador attacks, named a blue-ribbon commission to investigate the whole affair.

Suppose we cool it. There can be no such thing as an open intelligence operation. Like it or not, the craft of gathering foreign intelligence demands secrecy.

Yes, of course I believe that the people have a "right to know" about their government. But the Constitution itself recognizes that the people do not have to a right to know everything about their government. In such sensitive areas as the CIA, we have to place some measure of trust in the leaders of Congress and the executive branch.

By naming a top-flight investigative commission, President Ford has acted responsibly. It would be pleasant to say the same for the press.

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