

The CIA Inquiry

"QUIS CUSTODIET CUSTODES?" runs the Roman saying: "Who will watch the watchman?" It is a perennial question in government, and it comes up now in connection with President Ford's choices for a commission to inquire into the Central Intelligence Agency.

The reaction in Congress and around the country to the makeup of this group is not entirely favorable. It is strictly establishment and conspicuously lacks any member in blue jeans representative of the CIA's target group. Furthermore, its objectivity has been called into question particularly because its chairman, Vice President Rockefeller, has been for years a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board that has a role in evaluating and making suggestions for the use of intelligence gathered by the CIA.

The illegal domestic activities that have been laid to the CIA were first brought out fragmentarily in the so-called underground press. Last month Seymour Hersh, the reporter who broke the My Lai massacre story, gathered all the threads together in an overpowering expose published by the New York Times. It alleged that the CIA, intruding into forbidden territory inside the United States, collected files on more than 10,000 American citizens. This activity was aimed at the harassment and suppression of dissidents during the first Nixon administration when anti-Vietnam war protests were at their height.

No one who has followed the public career of E. Howard Hunt Jr. in any detail will have been astonished by these allegations. In fact, Mr. Nixon himself at one time acknowledged he had sought, under the Huston Plan, to bring together the CIA, the FBI and military intelligence agencies into one coordinated group to combat student turmoil and dissidence.

However, the magnitude of the CIA's domestic spying operation, working, Hersh reports, "as an insulated secret police agency not under internal question or audit," is a matter for both surprise and deep concern. James Angleton, who as chief of counterintelligence had general charge of the dossier collection, has since resigned from the CIA with an acknowledgment of the fundamental correctness of Hersh's story. We do not expect the newly appointed commission to turn up significantly more than has already been told.

What the American public is entitled to expect from this investigation is some acknowledgment from the White House, the Rockefeller commission and the CIA directorate itself that its invasion of the domestic scene during the Nixon years was illegal and immoral and will not happen again. The only thing that can restore respect for the CIA will be sensible, lawful direction at the top. As we saw over many years in the case of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, these are the only ingredients that will make a secret agency work for the public interest. Fortunately, James R. Schlesinger and William E. Colby, successive directors of the CIA subsequent to these illegal events, have given conscientious proof that the agency can be run with scrupulous regard for the rights of American citizens.