

WXPPost
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Developing a 'Gullibility Gap'

Watergate transformed utterly public attitudes toward secret operations conducted in the name of national security. Now many of the operatives who behaved questionably in the past are using that change of mood to clear their names, and settle old scores, by leaking information that casts blame on others.

The upshot is a wholesale airing of dirty linen about the main agencies in the intelligence community. But since the motives of those leaking the stuff are suspect, it behooves us all to be on guard against a present disposition to believe anything—a gullibility gap.

Only a few years ago the label national security conferred a kind of grace. In its name conscientious Americans labored diligently in thankless tasks all over the world. Political leaders known for their interest in "national security" were almost automatically deemed "responsible."

Now the reverse is true. National security has become a term of scorn and secret operations an object of automatic suspicion. After Watergate and Vietnam, nothing can be excluded as impossible.

People everywhere have trimmed their sails to the prevailing winds. That includes many present or former members of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

A notable example is the present director of the CIA, William Colby. For institutional if not personal reasons he determined that he wanted to give the the agency a good name with persons concerned about civil liberties in the press and the Congress.

He appeared publicly before many groups, some of them hostile to the

agency. He tried to come clean on certain operations—even if they were embarrassing to other officials. He moved to clear out of the agency some of those most deeply involved in the roughest aspects of protecting the CIA against Communist penetration.

In the course of that operation, Mr. Colby confirmed suspicions—widespread since Watergate—that the CIA had engaged in some domestic spying operations. One upshot was a press story, given the widest publicity, of a systematic and massive domestic spying operation conducted by the CIA in violation of its charter.

Persons connected with the agency, believing themselves fingered, hit back. They spread the word that the agency became involved in domestic operations only because of the perverse character of the responsible agency—the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover. That made it open season on the FBI.

Under pressure from reporters, various FBI agents began to talk. Among other things, they confirmed stories that Mr. Hoover had maintained files on the private peccadilloes of well-known Americans, including members of the Congress. Though these stories were not new, they attracted special attention because they were now endorsed by well-known former agents.

Additionally it develops that one of the former White House officials convicted for Watergate offenses, Charles Colson, has been telling stories which purportedly link the CIA with the White House "plumbers." While what he says may be true, the office of the Watergate special prosecutor is skeptical. Nobody can ignore Mr. Colson's interest in the book bonanza already

being exploited by John Dean and Jeb Magruder, not to mention Richard Nixon.

Given this choking miasma of conflicting and twisted motives, there is no way ordinary citizens or even experienced reporters and congressmen can be sure about who is doing what to whom for which purpose. Before believing, and even more before passing on the stories, a special measure of caution has to be exercised.

I do not favor a cover-up. I do not mean to disparage those who have developed the latest stories—especially since the stories have at last fostered, in the Senate select committee, a credible body to investigate the intelligence community.

But there are also other interests at stake. Genuine national secrets may be revealed. Important institutions, whose morale is not too good even now, are involved. So is the precious principle—established in the wake of the McCarthyite persecution of the China hands—that officials not be beaten over the head for acts committed in the totally different atmosphere of 15 years ago.

Last but not least, those of us in the press now have a special reason for prudence. We have a vested interest in protecting the reputation for careful and honest reporting acquired with so much difficulty in the coverage of the Watergate scandal. It would be a terrible thing if that reputation were now dissipated because, for reasons of rivalrous competition, we exaggerated stories which can eventually only lead back to a thicket of contentious claims by interested parties.