

The CIA Affair In Perspective

THE ROCKEFELLER COMMISSION released its report on the Central Intelligence Agency on the night of June 10, and on the morning of June 11 The New York Times almost broke an arm patting itself on the back. It was a remarkable acrobatic exercise: it merits a round of faint applause.

The Times started all this business about the CIA with a spreadeagled story by Seymour Hersh on December 22. It is useful to recall exactly what was charged at the time. This was the accusation: that "the CIA, directly violating its charter, conducted a massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation during the Nixon administration against the anti-war movement and other dissident groups in the United States."



In its lead story of June 11, the Times exulted that the Rockefeller Commission's report "confirmed the basic elements of an article in The New York Times last December 22 that quoted sources as saying that the CIA had engaged in a 'massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation against the anti-war movement and other groups.'"

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SUPPOSE WE GET this affair in perspective. The commission report does not confirm that the CIA conducted these "massive" and "illegal" operations in "direct violation of its charter." On the contrary, the report emphasizes that the CIA's charter is vague, ambiguous, and subject to conflicting interpretations by reasonably minded men. The report does assert that over the past 28 years, a few men in the CIA did a few things that were "plainly unlawful."

What about a key element in the original Times' story, that these horrid things happened "during the Nixon administration"? That element seems to have dropped down the memory hole. The report makes it clear that Operation CHAOS, as it came to be known, began on August 15, 1967, in response to "continuing, substantial pressure" from President Lyndon Johnson.

Was the operation "massive"? In terms of the CIA's own commitment, it was minuscule. Fewer than 30 agents were assigned to the project. At its peak, the staff totaled 52. Probably half a million persons were involved between 1967 and 1972 in anti-war dissidence. The CIA indexed 300,000 names. But "personality files" were compiled on only 7200.

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WAS THE OPERATION "illegal"? In the commission's view, "some domestic activities of Operation CHAOS unlawfully exceeded the CIA's statutory authority." But that finding has to be set against the commission's finding that the mission itself — to study foreign influence on domestic dissidence — was proper.

The great bulk of the CIA's investigation was lawful, prudent, and discreet. Files were kept under absolute security. The commission could find no evidence that the CIA at any time engaged in any "personal or electronic surveillance, wiretaps, or unauthorized entries against any dissident group or individual."

Yes, the CIA is fairly subject to criticism for its excesses, and for knuckling under to the pressures applied by successive presidents. It is a human institution, subject to human error. But on balance, and considering the dirty, delicate, dangerous nature of its assignment, the CIA — at least in its domestic performance — merits far more credit than blame.