

The Teller Of Truth

By Anthony Lewis

Last Dec. 22 The New York Times published a story by Seymour M. Hersh saying that the Central Intelligence Agency had conducted a "massive illegal domestic intelligence operation." The story created a great stir, leading to Congressional and Executive investigations of the C.I.A. But it also aroused extraordinarily sharp attacks on Mr. Hersh and The Times, and not only from the predictable right.

The Washington media world buzzed with sour talk about the story. Time magazine, reflecting the mood, said there was "a strong likelihood" that the piece was "considerably exaggerated and that The Times overplayed it." Charles Bartlett, the columnist, said "knowledgeable quarters" in the Government found it "highly exaggerated." On the right, John D. Lofton Jr. later wrote with relish that a Pulitzer Prize jury had turned down the Hersh story as "over-written, overplayed, under-researched and under-proven." Lofton added: "By implication, the C.I.A. has been found innocent of the charges against it reported by Hersh."

Last month the Rockefeller Commission reported that the C.I.A. had indeed carried on illegal domestic activities on a large scale. I was abroad at the time and wondered whether Mr. Hersh's critics had been big enough to admit their mistake. The answer appears to be no, and some comment is in order.

First, there can be no doubt any longer about the correctness of the Hersh story—or of The Times' decision to play it prominently. The Rocke-

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feller report, the work of eight conservative men, confirmed the story in substance and detail. And now the C.I.A. has made public its own report to President Ford, offering further confirmation.

The Rockefeller report said Operation CHAOS—it disclosed the name—had focused on the antiwar movement and compiled files on thousands of American citizens, as Hersh wrote. Was it "illegal," "domestic," "massive"? The commission said the operation had "unlawfully exceeded the C.I.A.'s statutory authority" and piled up "large quantities of information on the domestic activities of American citizens," . . . a "veritable mountain of material."

The commission also confirmed Mr. Hersh's statements that the C.I.A. had wiretapped, opened mail, infiltrated legitimate organizations. The tone of its report was carefully dead-pan, but the substance was hair-raising.

The New Republic published a thorough analysis by Morton Halperin comparing the Rockefeller findings and the original Hersh report. If anything, Hersh had understated the C.I.A.'s horrors. And so one must ask why there were such attacks on the story originally, and have been so few apologies lately.

One reason may of course be jealousy of the most important and successful investigative reporter in the business. Then there is ideology. There are people on the right who would like to have a secret police system in the United States, and who think we would have been better off not knowing that American soldiers massacred women and children at My Lai.

Such feelings can produce blinding animus. A curious example was provided by William Rusher, publisher of The National Review. After sitting next to Mr. Hersh on a television show, Mr. Rusher described him as "a tall, bulky type with a personality to match." Mr. Hersh is in fact a slightly built man, with the personality not of a bear but of a nervous badger.

Another reason for the pique at Mr. Hersh may be the special relationship that some in the Washington press corps have long favored with top C.I.A. men. There is a reluctance to attack those with whom one dines. Hersh, like Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in Watergate, is an outsider who does not play the social game.

Richard Helms, the former C.I.A. director, has been a particular intimate of some journalists. Charles Bartlett wrote last January that Helms could "be counted on to show [investigators] that he took strong measures to keep his agency on its side of the legal line." Mr. Helms may be a charming dinner partner, but he was also a principal author of the C.I.A.'s lies and illegalities.

Finally, some who criticized Mr. Hersh may not understand the limits on the function of investigative reporting. They complained that he had not produced conclusive evidence of C.I.A. wrongdoing. But journalists do not have subpoena power, and no one should expect them to perform like courts. It is enough if they call attention to wrongs and provoke correction by the formal system of law and politics. These wrongs had been called to official attention, but the politicians did nothing until Seymour Hersh forced their hand.

It is good to hold the press to meticulous standards, but a little odd to do so while winking at official crudities. William Colby, the present C.I.A. director, testified last February: "This operation was neither massive, illegal, nor domestic, as alleged." With his standard of truth, how long would he last as a journalist?