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The FBI's Illegal Mail Openings

Washington

The FBI said yesterday it had illegally opened mail in Los Angeles, San Francisco and six other cities in a program paralleling that of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Providing the first details of its mail surveillance project, James B. Adams, deputy associate FBI director, said Bureau agents opened mail for "national security" purposes for varying periods between 1940 and 1966.

In New York City an estimated 42 million pieces of mail were examined by agents from Oct. 1, 1959, to July 22, 1966, he said. Of these, 1011 pieces were opened, Adams told members of a House postal facilities subcommittee.

Representative Charles H. Wilson (Dem-Calif.) the subcommittee chairman, said the letter-opening figure sounded too low and instructed Adams to supply details on the other cities. Adams said he would try to do so, but insisted, "We do not have adequate records on this program."

In addition to New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, letters were opened in Boston, Washington, Detroit, Seattle and Miami, Adams said.

After Adams gave additional testimony in closed session, a

subcommittee source termed the program "very indiscriminate." The mail of anti-war groups and political extremists was often opened under the mandate of national security, the source said.

Adams did not say why the FBI's mail-openings were ended in 1966. This was the same year, however, that the late J. Edgar Hoover, then FBI director, also gave written orders that break-in were to be outlawed in "domestic subversion cases."

As described by Adams, the FBI's mail-opening program was similar to that of the CIA, which opened an estimated 13,000 letters a year to and from Communist countries between 1953 and 1973. Wilson's subcommittee has investigated the subject since the two agencies acknowledged the practice earlier this year.

The FBI sought to find foreign agents in the United States and U.S. citizens who might "sell out this country to hostile foreign powers," Adams said. The CIA's mail project was aimed principally at gathering foreign intelligence, but copies of thousands of letters a year were also passed to the FBI by CIA officials.

Adams testified there was "no statutory basis" for the FBI's mail-opening program. But after

the program was abandoned in 1966 the bureau continued to accept mail intelligence from the CIA — ranging from 6256 letters in 1967 to 1353 in 1972, he said.

Wilson's subcommittee has found no indications so far that any president knew about or approved these projects.

Declaring the FBI's mail program had been useful, Adams told the subcommittee that it once detected a U.S. citizen who had offered to sell anti-ballistic missile information to a foreign agent.

Asked later by reporters if the American had been prosecuted, Adams said no. He said government lawyers determined the evidence was tainted because the FBI lacked authority to open the suspect's mail.

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