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Phony Hysteria Over the CIA

SEYMOUR HERSH may not have been able to get the American people very excited about the supposed misdeeds of the CIA, but he is well on his way to destroying its effectiveness as an instrument of American policy.

Hersh is the New York Times reporter who kicked off the whole flap over the CIA with a page-one story on December 22, 1974, alleging that the agency had "illegally" conducted intelligence operations within the United States.



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In a column written the very next day, I named Hersh as "the chief journalistic point-man for the CIA hit," and predicted: "You will be hearing an awful lot about 'illegal' CIA activities in the U.S. on your favorite TV news show, in your favorite newsmagazine, and on the front page of your local newspaper. That's the way 'news' is managed, you see."

When I am at last gathered to my fathers and my journalistic booboos are fondly recounted, I hope somebody remembers the above-quoted little gem of prophecy and scores it to my credit.

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BUT THE pay-out for all the artificially-generated hysteria has been singularly uneven. A number of dependably liberal senators and congressmen, scenting an issue the media would richly reward them for pursuing, swung into action and have been hounding the CIA industriously ever since. One of them — Frank Church, the Idaho statesman — is even known to feel that, as a result of all that prime time, he is now presidential timber.

The American public, however, has shown

no discernible tendency to wax wroth over even the worst alleged instances of CIA malfeasance. The charge that its agents had steamed open some of Bella Abzug's private letters to the Soviet Union failed to excite anybody but Ms. Abzug. The disclosure that the CIA had discussions with various Mafiosi about doing in Fidel Castro resulted only in a nationwide ripple of regret that the project never got beyond the discussion stage.

Americans are a tough people, and the suggestion that some of their government's secret agents had occasionally committed technical violations of law failed to disconcert them perceptibly.

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IN THIS obviously unsatisfactory state of affairs, the liberal assault on the CIA has had to resort to uglier devices than mere propaganda.

Congressmen like Michael Harrington of Massachusetts have become virtual sieves through which secret information on legitimate CIA activities is regularly leaked to the press and promptly published — destroying, of course, whatever the Agency was trying to accomplish.

Not long ago Richard Welch, our top CIA man in Athens, was publicly identified as such. The item was reprinted in the Greek press, and a few days later unidentified anti-American gunmen killed Welch as he was entering his home.

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NOW SEYMOUR Hersh is back, with another page-one revelation in the New York Times. According to the usual "well-informed sources," Hersh says, the CIA "has funneled at least \$6 million in secret cash payments to individual anti-Communist political leaders in Italy since December 8 in an effort to prevent further Communist party gains in national elections there." In the very same edition, the Times reported the withdrawal of Socialist support from the governing anti-Communist coalition in Italy, making early elections inevitable.

It would be hard to exaggerate the harm Hersh's story may do, quite apart from its truth or falsity. It puts both the United States and such friends as it has in Italy in the worst possible light, just as the political struggle opens there to keep Italy from going Communist. It is by no means out of the question that one or more Italian politicians brave enough to work with the United States will be identified (rightly or wrongly) as recipients of American cash and gunned down as mercilessly as Richard Welch.