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The CIA And Spying For Freedom

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THE EVIDENCE appears to be growing that the Central Intelligence Agency violated its charter and broke the law by conducting domestic surveillances within the United States. Since that charge was made in the New York Times, President Ford has said that he had some of the same information on which the Times's story was based, and:

● Four CIA counter-intelligence officials have resigned, obviously with the concurrence of William E. Colby, director of the agency, and one of them, James Angleton, said of the Times's story, "There's something to it."

● Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin said on ABC's "Issues and Answers" that he had independent confirmation of the Times's story.

● A former CIA agent confided some elaborate details of domestic spying to Seymour Hersh of the Times.

● Richard Helms, CIA director at the time of the alleged domestic spying, issued a "categorical" denial that in fact, appeared to depend heavily on how the word "illegal" might be defined and on whether the spying was aimed specifically at "antiwar activists or dissidents."

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WATERGATE FANS will remember that these seemingly insignificant semantic usages are not unimportant. A political "dissident" who was also suspected by the CIA of being in touch with a foreign power might be classified as a security threat, not a dissident; and "illegal" spying might not seem at all illegal to the security mentality.

Even granting such "gray areas" and the obvious difficulties of knowing precisely who is a "dissident" and who is a paid foreign agent, it may



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well be asked why the CIA would commit — in Representative Lucien Nedzi's phrase — "illegalities in terms of exceeding their charter." Why not, instead, confide the problems to a Congress that has usually been friendly and ask for appropriate legislation?

One reason, no doubt, was the fact that the Federal Bureau of Investigation regards itself as having the official counterintelligence mission. Especially during the lifetime of the formidable J. Edgar Hoover, had the CIA sought either to cut into the FBI's turf or to imply that the FBI was not doing the job, Hoover's wrath and vengeance would have been terrible to behold, certainly not to have been lightly courted.

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MORE IMPORTANT, however, is the kind of personal outlook and world view that — understandably enough — is almost inevitably developed by those who spend their lives in the national security field. This security mentality produces, first, a kind of tunnel vision — a narrow and constant focus on the most frightening and threatening aspect of international relations.

The very nature of the job also tends to exaggerate the threat, hence the response. One who regards himself as responsible for something as cosmic as the national security is likely to assume the worst case. If it is possible that the Soviets will build a hundred missiles rather than ten, better assume the hundred, and build 200; if it is possible that a black radical is being paid by the Algerians, through whom the Soviets may control or exploit him, better keep him under surveillance, however "illegal" it might be on paper to do so.

Such a world, moreover, especially when most of its activities are carried out in secrecy, is bound to create a heightened sense of power. Who can do "wrong" in protecting an innocent nation from threats it does not recognize? The legitimizing of "cover" — acting secretly — makes it unlikely that anyone will be caught, anyway. As the Nixon White House all too well demonstrated, the responsibility for "national security" and the power to act in secret can be a heady and corrupting combination.

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THE NATIONAL security mentality also seems to believe that the nation can be something different from what it does. Governments can be toppled, foreign officials assassinated or subverted, armies recruited and launched on invasions, all clandestinely and under cover of lies — but none of that has anything to do with what the country is, or what it stands for. These "black" deeds, in fact, permit the United States, in a hostile world, to remain the bastion of freedom, the home of democracy, an open society standing for honor and decency among nations.

By the curious double standard of the security world, it was not a threat to American liberty, but a means of protecting it.

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