

The Army's Indiscretion

Recent disclosures in "The Washington Monthly" that the Army is operating an extensive political intelligence network raise the specter of secret military power undermining civilian rule. The American Civil Liberties Union has challenged in court what appears to be an unauthorized system of surveillance under control of the Defense Department. The A.C.L.U. charges that by maintaining dossiers on political dissenters, a special intelligence branch with some 300 offices throughout the country potentially violates the rights of free speech, association and privacy.

After some pointed inquiries by several members of Congress, the Pentagon says it has eliminated a computerized data bank containing millions of names, associations and incidents; but it appears that the Army retains complete microfilm files of virtually the same information. "Regardless of the imaginary military objective," Senator Sam Ervin, Democrat of North Carolina, observes that "the chief casualty of this overkill is the Constitution of the United States."

The danger represented by a domestic military secret service is, in fact, more serious than is indicated by the legal language of the A.C.L.U.'s charge. In contrast to such civilian agencies as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, an Army intelligence system operating under the cover of military secrecy could skirt all supervision and restraint by Congress, the executive branch and the courts. Neither the scope of its activities nor the competence and discretion of its personnel would be subject to civilian regulation. Unauthorized by law, the operation is accountable only to its own command, as indeed appears to have been the case ever since the network was created in 1965.

The defense establishment clearly has a mandate and a duty to use its intelligence apparatus for the protection of internal security. It is responsible for the safeguarding of communications, transportation, supply lines and defense plants. Since the armed forces also play an important role in the prevention of civil disorder, they have a legitimate concern with the identification of persons who might engage in sabotage or similar criminal acts. They have at their disposal pertinent information gathered by the civilian law-enforcement and investigatory agencies.

But the indications are that the military intelligence network strayed far beyond such legitimate precautions and roamed instead uninhibited into the area of political opinions. Monitoring of ideologies smacks more of thought control than of national security. If allowed to go unchecked, it could open the door to politico-military control over civilian government. The political dossier on civilians is not a legitimate weapon in the Army's arsenal.