

Terrorism—and Repression

The danger in New Left bombing is not confined to the very great damage political fanatics can inflict on persons and property. The necessity for providing safeguards to the community against such terrorist acts often prompts governmental countermeasures that are themselves a threat to liberty.

Political terrorism and political repression are historic partners, each capitalizing on the other to blot out democratic rights. Reports from Washington indicate that such a response to the recent wave of bombings and bomb threats by radical extremists may be gaining favor in the White House.

Administration officials say preparations are being made for more extensive use of wiretaps, informers and undercover agents to penetrate the conspiratorial councils of those plotting guerrilla warfare against society. The argument is made that such intensified surveillance will actually protect civil liberties by preventing bombings and thus warding off the kind of public outrage that would trigger a wholesale assault on radicals.

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That argument has most serious flaws, however. Not least among these is the inadequate sophistication many police officers bring to the highly sensitive task of political espionage. One Administration official frankly acknowledges this limitation. "We need better trained people in metropolitan police departments so they can distinguish between a guy with a beard and a subversive," he says.

Even that recognition provides scant insurance against abuse of the surveillance function by overzealous sleuths, Federal as well as local. Internal security, as the record of the McCarthy era proves, readily becomes a passport for investigation and suppression of all forms of dissent.

This interaction is the special tragedy of the fanaticism that currently reflects itself in bombings, arson and other forms of terror. "The bomb-thrower and the jailer are brothers under the skin," warns Irving Howe in a perceptive analysis in last Sunday's New York Times Magazine. The challenge to society is to find means of defeating the one without surrendering to the other.