

Spies in the Library JUL 31 1970

The Internal Revenue Service has discontinued a practice so dubious that it could have been initiated only through the gravest lapse of administrative judgment. For some weeks, it seems, I.R.S. agents in several cities have been requesting access to the circulation records of public libraries in order to get the names of those who borrowed books on explosive devices. An official of the Service at first dismissed the practice as routine—"just a continual building of information . . . in line with the proliferation of bombings across the country."

On second thought, following vehement protest, the Service—which has a division concerned with alcohol, tobacco and firearms—now officially announces that while it never favored a "general search" for readers' names, it is discontinuing a procedure which one of its officials has termed "impractical." That is surely the least of its flaws. More to the point, it is what *South Today*, organ of the Southern Regional Council, calls "the nation's first coordinated effort to gather intelligence information that makes Americans suspect because of what they read."

Obviously there are circumstances in which library records might legitimately be sought for help in the solution of a crime. A bank robbery clearly patterned after one in a book might, for example, properly send a detective around to the local library to get a few leads. The American Library Association asks only that in such a case he come armed with a court order based on a judicial finding of reasonableness and limiting the searcher to a specific objective.

Otherwise it is easy to see how the reading habits of a people might be severely inhibited, especially in politically repressive areas, to the point of a jittery self-censorship. Police agents rarely go in for nice discriminations, and library patrons might well be disinclined to have their names recorded on government lists of those known to have read Karl Marx or Eldridge Cleaver or, in John Birch neighborhoods, Dwight D. Eisenhower. On what kind of suspects' roster might a reader wind up who had successively taken out "The People, Yes," "The Guns of August" and "Death in the Afternoon"?

To its watchful librarians the country owes a vote of thanks. To itself it owes an alertness against any repetition of the I.R.S.'s deplorable venture.