

Dangerous Boondoggle

Judge Richard B. Austin of the United States District Court in Chicago may well be right when, in dismissing the suit against the Army's ventures into political surveillance, he called such sleuthing "a typical Washington bureaucratic boondoggling." But fundamental questions remain.

The Federal Government must, of course, use its investigatory powers to prevent acts of sabotage or other violent and unlawful disruption. This is one of the functions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Similarly, it is within the province of the military to use its intelligence apparatus for the protection of communications, defense installations and the like.

But nothing can justify military spying on civilians' political views and activities, or the maintenance of dossiers on persons of whose opinions the Army disapproves. Such investigation is rendered no more acceptable because, as Judge Austin concluded, it was the inefficient handiwork of "an assemblage of Keystone Cops."

As for the political intelligence files already collected, the country is entitled to firm assurances that their dispatch to Fort Holabird, Md., "for final disposition" actually means destruction, not storage. Moreover, the promise that the civilian surveillance had already been largely halted since its disclosure last June is inadequate. Such off-limits activities must be stopped, not "largely" but altogether.