# CIA 'Outshuffled' Post Office, Opened Airmail From China

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The Central Intelligence Agency surreptitiously opened incoming airmail from China for weeks at a time despite a concentrated effort by U.S. postal inspectors to prevent the tampering.

Chief U.S. Postal Inspector William J. Cotter said the CIA was authorized only to conduct a "mail cover" operation —scrutiny of envelopes—and was explicitly warned that none of the mail was to be opened.

Another top postal official added that the CIA representative who secured the Postal Servic's approval of the project agreed not to tamper with the mail in any way.

Postal inspectors in San Francisco were even assigned to watch the CIA agents watching the mail and make sure the rules were followed, Cotter told a reporter. But somehow, he sid, the CIA operatives managed to inercept and evidently copy selected first-class letters.

Federal law prohibits the opening of first-class mail without a search warrant. By contrast, a "mail cover," which the CIA requested, is a long-standing although sometimes controversial investigative technique and does not require a court order. It involves the recording of information on envelopes, such as the names of the senders and the addresses.

The CIA "outshuffled our people on the scene," sad James V. P. Conway, executive assistant for postal affairs and formerly cotter's top deputy. "I was not only surprised, but disappointed . . . unhappy. Those are the most genteel words I can think of to describe my reaction."

CIA Director William E. Colby acknowledged the West Coast mail openings in congressional testimony earlier this year, but he gave no hint that the operation was conducted in violation of explicit conditions laid down by postal authorities.

The CIA's admission that mail had been opened, both Cotter and Conway reported, astounded the postal inspectors who conducted the special surveillance of the CIA agents assigned to the project.

The inspectors "would have bet money that nothing like that happened," Conway said. A former CIA agent, Cotter was named chief postal inspec-

tor in April, 1969, by then-Postmaster General Winston M. Blount. Several months later, he said, "a colleague of mine from the other place (the CIA) contacted me and said they'd like to survey some mail between Red China and the West Coast."

Cotter said he was "sensitive" about the proposition because, as a former CIA empolyee, he already knew of an "unauthorized" CIA mail-opening project in New York, which he eventually helped bring to a halt. In any case, he said, he told the CIA to take up the West Coast request with Conway.

Conway said he was unaware of this. He said he first mid-1969 about how mail was routed from the Far East. Sometime after that, he said, an official from the CIA's covert operations division, whom he declined to name, came to see him, showed him a generally worded letter, and asked for permission to examine "the outsides," the envelopes only, of incoming letters from China.

"I said that was all right, but that the mail was not ho be opened by them or interfered with," Conway recalled. "I looked the guy right in the eye and told him that and I said, 'Do you understand?' He said he understood."

Perhaps half a dozen CIA agents, Conway estimated, were assigned to the project, which was carried out at a U.S. postal inspection facility in San Mateo, Calif., near the San Francisco airport.

The project was carried out on four separate occasions, each lasting a week or two, between November, 1969, and October, 1971. Each time, Conway said, two to three postal inspectors were ordered "to stay with them all the time" in an effort to make sure no mail was opened or envelopes damaged.

Normally, postal officials conduct "mail cover" operations and supply interested law enforcement agencies with the information gleaned.

But Conway said he let the CIA do the work because "we're talking about a lot of mail—probably a few hundred letters a day. One of the inspectors brought it over in sacks from the airport . . . I told them, 'Look, this stuff can't be delayed.' "

Both Cotter and Conway were uncertain just how the CIA opened the mail, but they suspect that the agents tucked

away selected letters when postal inspectors weren't looking, copied them at the CIA's offices, and teturned them into the mailstream the next day.

"Apparently they had watch lists' of the mail they wanted to read, Cotter has stated. Conway added that less than 5 per cent of the China mail, which ranged in estimated volume from 1,000 to 2,500 letters a week, was inercepted.

The exact purpose of the project remains unclear. Colby, who has publicly acknowledged the illegality of CIA mail openings, has described it as a double-barreled attempt to develop foreign contacts and check on foreign censorship techniques.

However, Cotter said he vaguely recalled being told that the CIA hoped to get some insights into the progress of China's nuclear bomb testing program. "It may sound silly," Cotter said, "but if they were exploding A-bombs in China, I thought maybe they could take a Geiger counter and run it over the mail and see if there was any radioactivity."

Conway said the CIA did ask for permission to check out the mail with some sort of instrument. Bur he said he was told the CIA wanted to do this to find out "whether the mail was being tampered with fore arrival here. in China" or Hong Kong be-

Following the first week of the program, Conway recalled, "our people said that they (the CIA agents) found quite a few letters that had been tampered with," ostensibly n China. Apparently, "the flaps were damaged."

Cotter said the CIA's records on the project, which he inspected recently, showed that the Postal Service's warnings against opening the mail were not misunderstood. "They admit it in the records," Cotter said. "He (Conway) did admonish them."