

SFChronicle
The CIA's
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Mystery
Mailbag

Washington

The Justice Department criminal division has seized 110 pieces of mail sent from the Soviet Union and apparently intercepted by the CIA in early 1972, the Postal Service disclosed yesterday.

CIA Director William E. Colby said he had no idea how the correspondence ended up in CIA headquarters but said it apparently was removed from the mail as part of mail examination operation the CIA has admitted it conducted from 1953 to 1973.

Colby said 85 postcards and 25 letters — all of them opened — were found on a shelf at CIA headquarters during a recent routine change in office space. He sent the bundle to the U.S. Postal Service.

The Justice Department then used a search warrant to seize the correspondence for an investigation by its criminal division, Postmaster General Benjamin F. Bailar said.

"The FBI and postal inspectors are going over the material for evidence of possible criminal viola-

tions," a Justice Department spokesman said.

Bailar demanded that the CIA turn over any other intercepted mail it might be holding.

A Postal Service spokesman said this is the first evidence that the CIA has failed to return mail to the "mail stream" after intercepting it to examine the contents.

Bailar made public an exchange of letters with Colby in which the CIA director extended "my own sincere apology" to the addressees of the intercepted mail. Bailar told Colby he was "shocked" by his revelation.

Bailar wrote Colby he had been "distressed" when he learned earlier this year that the CIA had been intercepting and copying mail.

"The revelation that mail was removed from the international mail stream, opened and retained indefinitely, is doubly disturbing," Bailar said.

Before surrendering the

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correspondence to the Justice Department, Bailar made photocopies of all the letters and cards to be sent to the addressees with a letter of explanation.

"The delay in delivery of this letter was caused by the apparent interception and acknowledged retention of the mail by the CIA," Bailar wrote.

"I want you to know that the U.S. Postal Service con-

siders this incident a serious violation of your rights and in no way condones or sanctions it."

Colby's explanation of the reappearance of the postcards and letters left many questions unanswered.

He said they apparently were forwarded in a single package with a label ad-

ressed to one of the original recipients, who was with a New York firm with which he "conducted normal business correspondence in no way related to mail intercepted."

The unidentified recipient handed the package to a U.S. citizen in an unnamed Latin American country who passed it on to the local CIA installation, which then forwarded it to CIA headquarters on March 27, 1972.

United Press