

Dangerous Threshold

"Looking from afar at the entire history of American security policies," wrote David Brion Davis, historian at Yale University, "one is struck by the appalling discrepancy between noisy commotion and actual danger. . . . At times we have approached the threshold of becoming a police state."

The torrent of recent disclosures of illegally tapped phones, deliberately provoked disorders, Government-ordered break-ins and, finally, the temporary approval by the President of an all-pervasive illegal plan for domestic intelligence leaves no doubt that the nation had moved toward that threshold.

The perils which confront the country today have been long in building. They are not, as a study of the F.B.I.'s own history shows, the handiwork of any one Administration. Decades of hot and cold wars as well as flurries of domestic unrest have blurred the boundary between security and hysteria. Paranoid patriots and frightened politicians have seized on this confusion by secretly substituting police-state methods for legitimate law-enforcement. Unless kept carefully in check, the "intelligence community," as the surveillance forces call themselves, tend to inch deeper and deeper into the domain of the community at large.

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The most disconcerting aspect of such a slide toward the fatal threshold has been growing public acquiescence. As the political foghorn reiterates suspicions of perfidy and subversion, the populace loses its sense of outrage about Big Brother's eavesdropping. The privacy invaded by illegal snoopers is somebody else's problem. And so, the dossiers are filled with illegally collected information; the informers are unleashed, first against unpopular dissenters and ultimately against rival candidates; the ex-agents and ex-cops are enlisted in the dirty business of burglarizing the Government's opponents as well as in the drive to re-elect the incumbent.

The special burden of the Nixon Administration is that it deliberately seized upon a dangerous trend and turned it into unofficial doctrine, sanctioned by the White House. Thus it happened that the President, instead of chastising an aide who urged him to commit an illegal act, authorized the illegal order. Under the guise of national security, the right to privacy was systematically diminished.

There was a time when Americans traveling in totalitarian countries viewed the bugged hotel room or the fraudulent election process with a healthy mixture of outrage and incredulity. These were the afflictions of less fortunate countries which would some day be cured by the contagious example of freedom.

Unhappily, it is instead the contagion of fear, suspicion and arrogant power that has infected American society and government. Too many Americans, sincere in their concern about hostile forces abroad and dissenters at home, allowed the clever manipulators of power to give legitimacy to the doctrine of protective reaction strikes against the laws and the Constitution.

It has been left to the Watergate scandals to remind the American people that liberty, when placed in protective custody, will shrivel and die.