

A Vetoed Embassy Break-in Plan



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THE SECRETIVE National Security Agency, which specializes in gathering foreign intelligence, once tried to get the late J. Edgar Hoover to break into foreign embassies to steal their spy codes.

This was too much for the intrepid old FBI director who vetoed the project, according to a top-secret summary, "because of risk."

The summary digests the testimony last year of Tom Charles Huston, a young White House aide, behind guarded doors of the Senate Armed Services Committee. The senators questioned Huston about his notorious plan, endorsed by President Nixon, to root out radicals through housebreakings, wiretaps and intimidation.

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SOME OF HOOVER'S top aides, testified Huston, had wanted him to use teenage informers on college campuses. At first, Huston refused to employ anyone under 21. But "after the voting age was lowered to 18 by Congress," said Huston, "Hoover permitted FBI campus informers to be lowered to 18."

Hoover apparently felt anyone old enough to vote was old enough to spy.

Some of Hoover's aides were privately skeptical of the old crime fighter's grasp of revolutionary activities, Huston told the committee. He said the dissident FBI aides "believed Hoover didn't understand the difference between the Communists of the '30s and '40s and the present-day revolutionaries."

Huston testified that, before Hoover

scotched the secret scheme, federal intelligence agencies plotted the housebreakings and other criminal acts without concern for "the exact lines to be drawn" or for "their legality."

"There was never a discussion," he added, "as to limiting the activities to foreign-inspired activities." In other words, relates the top-secret summary, Huston "assumed the group would deal with both foreign-inspired and purely domestic threats to national security."

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A MYSTERIOUS "NSID-6" plan, mentioned in the summary, would have allowed federal agents to listen in on "communication of U.S. citizens using international facilities." This presumably means wiretaps would have been permitted on overseas phone calls.

There was talk, too, of mail covers to develop foreign intelligence in the U.S. But Huston insisted this might "entail the identification of contacts of Soviet bloc intelligence sources." In other words, the mail cover might interfere with U.S. informants.

The idea of breaking into foreign embassies to steal their codes was proposed by the former National Security Agency boss, Admiral Noel Gaylor, who is now U.S. military commander in the Pacific.

"Huston said that NSA (Gaylor) wanted the FBI to conduct surreptitious entry for foreign cryptographic material," states the summary. "Hoover didn't because of risk."