"Operation Chaos": Files on 7,200

Antiwar Groups, Dissidents Were Targets of 'Improper' Program

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The Central Intelligence Agency "unlawfully exceeded" its authority by spying on thousands of Americans in this country under a highly secret program code-named "Operation Chaos."

President Ford's CIA commission, in findings revealed yesterday, disclosed that the agency spread such a wide net in this "improper" operation that the names of 500,000 Americans and their organizations ended up in a computerized index.

Within that 500,000 total, the report said, the CIA developed 7,200 "personality files on citizens of the United States."

The original directive for Operation Chaos, the report noted, was to see if foreign nations were behind some of the antiwar demonstrations and other dissent activities in the United States.

But the commission said, the operation ran out of control during its six-year duration, from August, 1967, to March, 1974—and turned into domestic surveillance beyond the agency's charter.

"Although the stated purpose of the operation was to determine whether there were any foreign controls with American dissident groups," the commission concluded, "it resulted in the accumulation of considerable material on domestic dissidents and their activities."

The commission noted that the operation exceeded what was "reasonably required," and thus was improper.

"Some domestic activities of Operation Chaos unlawfully exceeded the CIA's statutory authority," the commission noted.

Richard M. Helms, director of the CIA from 1966 to 1973, issued a statement on Dec. 24, 1974, that "categorically denied" that the agency while under his direction conducted "illegal domestic operations" against war protesters.

The commission report makes testimony it heard that alleged that Helms played a direct role in Operation Chaos—even to issuing a directive ordering CIA field executives worried about going beyond their charter to cooperate.

The report supports past statements by James J. Angleton, former head of CIA's counterintelligence operations, that he did not run any special group spying on Americans.

The available evidence indicates that the chief of counterintelligence had little connection with the actual operations of Chaos.

According to a CIA memorandum in May, 1969, Director Helms specifically instructed the chief of the operation [Chaos] to refrain from discussing part of his activities to the counterintelligence chief.

Helms himself, the report said, told the commission that "he could recall no specific directions he gave to the Chaos group chief to report directly to him."

Former President Johnson provided the initial mandate for Operation Chaos in 1967 when he asked the CIA to investigate whether foreign influences were behind civil disorders in the United States.

The CIA responded by setting up a special team eventually sealed off from the rest of the government in what the report called a "covertly secret area."

The CIA reported it could find no evidence of foreign influences with racist and antiwar disturbances in the United States but was given several presidential assignments that pushed the agency deeper into domestic surveillance.

One CIA employee, "Fred Dozier," the report said, "concluded that the motivations underlying student radicalism arose from social and political alienation at home and not from conspiratorial activity by agents working abroad."

Although the report noted that the CIA's counterintelligence work has a "specter of the past," it concluded that the CIA is holding to its "long-standing policy of avoiding involvement in the secret and covert activities of the agency or its foreign counterparts as permitted by law."