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CIA Panel Treads Fine Line Between Revelation and Sympathy

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For all the furor over the timing of the release of the Rockefeller commission report on the CIA's domestic surveillance activities and the decision not to publish its findings on allegations of agency involvement in overseas political assassinations, the report presents nothing in the way of substantial new revelations.

In the post-Watergate era, this immediately triggers suspicions of a cover-up, suspicions that were first evoked by the conservative, establishment nature of the panel, some of whose members had had previous ties with the intelligence community.

There is a political rule of thumb, however, that the most difficult problems are referred to a sympathetic commission. Even if President Ford issued no guidelines or helpful hints, the report appears to walk the fine line that he obviously wanted: To conduct an investigation that at least appears satisfactory but not one that would impair the CIA.

ALONG WITH its findings of wrongdoings, the report contains judicious recommendations for improved congressional oversight and administrative reforms that would prevent them in the future.

Even though all the commission's major findings confirm reports already in the press, the systematic snooping, opening of mail and compiling of

Analysis

dossiers on American citizens, most of whom were engaged in anti-war or civil rights activities, is still staggering as outlined in the report.

It describes a 21-year program of surveillance in which 8,700 pieces of mail to and from the Soviet Union were opened and a seven-year program of spying on Americans in which files were opened on 13,000 people and organizations and index records kept on another 300,000.

The name of this program, begun in 1967 at the insistence of President Lyndon B. Johnson, tells something about the Cold War mentality: "Operation CHAOS," was its name, which calls to mind the sinister "KAOS" agents in the television comedy series, "Get Smart!"

THE REPORT also tells of 32 illegal domestic wiretaps, 32 electronic buggings, and 12 burglaries by the CIA. By comparison, CIA Director William Colby told a Senate committee last January that there had been files opened on 10,000 American citizens and only five break-ins and 21 telephone taps.

One barrier to any possible cover-up is that President Ford is turning over the 80-page chapter on assassination plots and the material on which it is based to the special Senate committee that is also investigating the CIA. Under the chairmanship of Frank Church of Idaho, a liberal Democrat and foe of the Vietnam war, the panel

FORD'S DECISION to give the assassination material to the committee inspired some cynical speculation that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were involved in the assassination plots and that Ford would probably be

is not likely to whitewash the agency.

Church yesterday characterized the commission report as "limited in scope" and said the recommendations did not go far enough.

"What is needed is specific prohibitions in the law with penalties attached to violations of the law," he said in an interview on public television.

just as happy to let the Democratic-controlled Senate committee reveal this.

It also dismayed some conservatives such as Sen. James Allen, D-Ala., who grumbled that with the Congress's record for leaks Ford might "just as well have put it on national television."

His refusal to publicize the potentially embarrassing assassination allegations pleased other conservatives, however, many of whom in his party are restive under the Ford-Rockefeller leadership and are looking for an excuse to support someone like former California Gov. Ronald Reagan.

SUCH TACTICS would be terribly risky in the post-Watergate era, however, particularly with such a potentially explosive subject. Some observers, moreover, doubt that Ford is capable of planning and executing such a maneuver. At any rate, there is also a strong suspicion that some of the plots had their inception in the Eisenhower administration.

"When did Ford ever plan anything that complicated that worked out?" asks one conservative critic. Another, a Southerner, thought the change of signals on releasing the chapter on assassinations over the weekend showed

that the administration still has a knack for fouling up, which the popular Mayaguez rescue operation had obscured.

"It's a mistake not to release the bad stuff yourself," says one veteran Republican pol. "In this day and age people can think of too many reasons why you didn't."

One reason some people are thinking of is that the commission's investigation, which it didn't have time to complete, would suffer by comparison to the one Church's committee is expected to undertake.

SOME SOURCES at the White House were critical of Rockefeller because of the commission's failure to advise the President until two or three weeks ago that it was limiting its investigation of the alleged assassination plots to their domestic implications.

The commission members defended their work, however, and attributed the absence of new revelations to an aggressive press. "I think we made as careful a study as we could," said C. Douglas Dillon, the New York investment banker who served in both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. "We couldn't find anything that amounted to anything that the press had not already found out."

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