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The Layers of Secrecy Peeled Away

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From its founding in 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency has worked under a mantle of secrecy that, combined with congressional apathy, presidential protection and Cold War exigencies, made the agency almost opaque from outside view.

But in the spring of 1972, the layers of concealment began to fall away.

The initial reason for the revelations did not appear to have much to do with the CIA. Columnist Jack Anderson began publishing a series of columns outlining a relationship between the International Telephone and Telegraph Co. and the Nixon administration, and its role in quashing an antitrust suit against the giant multinational firm. In return, it was alleged, the GOP got an offer from ITT to underwrite the Republican National Convention in 1972.

A CIA connection with ITT surfaced several months later, after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee decided to investigate certain aspects of ITT's foreign operations, notably the company's political role in Chile. A special investigating subcommittee was set up and Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) headed it.

Church began the investigation in the spring of 1973, and the subcommittee soon uncovered ITT's involvement in Chilean politics—and an ITT link.

The revelations concerned an offer of \$1 million to the agency by the company that ITT wanted to be used to block the election of Salvador Allende, a Marxist, as president of Chile. The company had large investments in the country. The CIA said it turned down the offer, but it was disclosed that the agency had secretly aided Allende's opponents before his election and later worked covertly to "destabilize" his government. Allende was killed in a military coup a year after his election. The U.S. has denied any direct role in the coup. The significance of the disclosure was the fact that for the first time in its history, a covert CIA operation was exposed and the agency was forced to publicly defend it.

At the same, however, another event that would later help shatter the CIA's mantle of secrecy some more was unfolding, U.S. intelligence sources say. Unknown to Church, then CIA director James Schlesinger had ordered his personnel to report to him any CIA activities that were outside the scope of its 1947 charter or were illegal. Schlesinger was stunned when he received a 300-page report outlining abuses, most of them connected with a secret program to spy on U.S. citizens. The program included electronic eavesdropping, wiretaps, the opening of mail, and other spying activities outside the scope of the agency charter, which restricts it to collection of intelligence overseas. Schlesinger, the sources say, uncertain exactly what to do with the report, eventually turned it over to his successor, William Casper.

Several months later, the specific abuses outlined in the report appeared in a series of articles in the New York Times, causing widespread demands for a full investigation of the agency. A commission headed by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller issued a report in June, 1975, confirming the news stories.

But even before those revelations, the CIA was feeling the glare of political scandal. The agency had become directly involved in the Watergate investigation, with the five burglars who carried out the burglary on Democratic headquarters possessing some sort of CIA background. Further, it was learned that, under pressure from Nixon, the CIA half-heartedly had attempted to cover up the Watergate break-in by saying that an FBI investigation could affect a covert operation in Mexico. In addition, the CIA admitted once helping one of the Watergate burglars, E. Howard Hunt, by providing him with material to aid the break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist and, at another time, a red wig for a secret mission on behalf of the Nixon administration to talk with a key figure in the ITT scandal.

In 1974, Congress began to move to exert a broader monitoring of the CIA. A law was approved requiring the agency to report covert operations to six different committees. Congress also appointed bipartisan select committees in both houses to study the agency. Church was picked to head the Senate investigation, Rep. Otis Pike (D-Riverhead) to head the House's.

Throughout most of last year, the committees held hearings. But the disclosures led to serious confrontations between Congress and the White House, which argued that the revelations were reducing the effectiveness of U.S. intelligence agencies. The White House was especially disturbed over news leaks of secret information on intelligence operations—such as covert financial aid to Italian politicians, aid to two factions in Angola, involvement in assassination plots against foreign leaders and other operations.

Pike's committee finished its investigation last month, but the White House sought to block its publication until it could be censored. The House voted to support the White House position, but the publication of key sections of the report was leaked and published last week in the Village Voice.