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Inman: little chance of intentional domestic spying

Washington
Bobby Ray Inman doesn't look like a spy. With his prominent glasses and equally prominent grin, he could be a copier salesman or the owner of a string of convenience stores.

But the Rhonesboro, Texas, native in fact is one of the premier United States intelligence officers of the post-World War II era. Among other things, Mr. Inman, a retired vice-admiral, has been director of naval intelligence, vice-director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, chief of the National Security Agency (NSA), and deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

"This country does need to have strong, healthy, viable intelligence organizations," insists Inman, now head of MCC Corporation, a microelectronics research company.

For the most part, the US public supports this goal, he says — with the caveat that spy agencies never again "resort to domestic surveillance," as they did through the Vietnam war.

The abuses of the past — CIA spying on antiwar protesters, NSA perusal of US telegrams headed overseas — weren't entirely the fault of espionage agencies, says Inman. "These weren't things the intelligence agencies decided, 'Gee, wouldn't that be great to do?' They all flow from decisions at senior levels of the executive branch, [telling] the intelligence community to do them," he says.

Today there is little likelihood of another Operation Chaos (the illegal CIA domestic spying program) or Operation Shamrock, NSA's long-term scanning of US telegrams headed overseas, says Inman. But with the NSA's electronic ears sucking up information all over the world, "the prospect of incidental, unintentioned acquisition of information on US individuals is a reality," he admits.

NSA procedures guard against abuse of this data, he says. When it is recognized that a message contains the identity of a US citizen, that identity is suppressed.

— P. G.



Bobby Ray Inman

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