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CIA 'Chaos' Files Detail Spying Within U.S.

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Newly released documents suggest that the CIA counterintelligence program known as Operation Chaos involved surveillance of American citizens on a scale much larger than previously realized.

The files indicate that the CIA infiltrated political groups in the United States in order to collect purely domestic information unrelated to foreign intelligence purposes. But CIA operations of this type repeatedly encountered resistance from agency employees who considered the program illegal.

These and other details of domestic spying by the CIA are contained in documents obtained in a civil suit against the agency by a woman claiming damages for illegal surveillance of her political activities.

Operation Chaos was the government's counterintelligence program against anti-war activists and others it considered "radicals" in the 1960s and early '70s. A commission headed by former Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller concluded that "some domestic activities of Operation Chaos unlawfully exceeded the CIA's statutory authority."

CIA files show that in the course of the Operation Chaos, the agency collected information on the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; his widow, Coretta King; former Rep. Bella Abzug, D-N.Y.; and Rep. Ronald Dellums, D-Calif. The information, in most cases, concerned their foreign policy views, especially opposition to the Vietnam War.

At the request of the FBI, the CIA

also apparently collected information about the overseas movements of three Indian activists associated with the American Indian Movement. The names of the three were deleted from the released files.

'In the Highest Category'

Distinctions between the CIA's domestic and foreign targets were blurred following a 1968 instruction from then-director Richard Helms, who said, "Operational priority of (Chaos) activities in the field is in the highest category, ranking with Soviet and Chicom (Chinese Communist)" activities.

In the course of Operation Chaos, which ran from Aug. 15, 1967, to March 15, 1974, the CIA compiled 13,000 files including files on 7,200 American citizens, and developed a computerized index containing the names of more than 300,000 persons and organizations.

Although several years old, the CIA files are relevant today for at least three reasons:

- The Carter administration and Congress are drafting a charter to govern U.S. intelligence activities. Standards for spying on U.S. citizens, especially abroad, remain a controversial, unsettled issue.
- The Justice Department is actively defending past practices of U.S. intelligence agents in a number of civil suits by persons alleging violations of their constitutional rights.
- CIA Director Stansfield Turner and FBI Director William H. Webster have proposed cutbacks in the Freedom of Information Act that might hinder future disclosure of activities like Operation Chaos.

The operation's primary purpose was to learn of any foreign support, guidance or inspiration for five categories of U.S. "radicals" — black militants, radical students, anti-war groups, underground newspapers and groups supporting draft evaders or deserters.

'Passive' Domestic Role

A secondary purpose, according to the CIA, was "the passive collection of material relating solely to U.S. domestic radical activities, pinpointing leaders, funding (and) weapons acquisition."

CIA agents repeatedly expressed concern that this passive domestic role tended to become an active, operational role. Indeed, the CIA wanted to maintain a "residual counteraction capability."

One CIA field officer said he was "disturbed" about domestic spying because "I do not think it is the sort of thing that we should be involved in." After receiving an interesting report, he said, there is a "natural tendency" to request additional information, leading to an active CIA role in this country.

The Management Advisory Group, a training and policy group for young CIA executives, complained to Helms that domestic intelligence activities "exceed the scope of the CIA charter" and "could cause great embarrassment to the agency."

In the face of such misgivings, and similar concerns reported by the CIA's inspector general, William V. Broe, Helms insisted that Operation Chaos was a "legitimate counterintelligence function of the agency." Helms said, in December 1972, that it "cannot be stopped simply because some members of the organization do not like this activity."

CIA officials were particularly concerned about the possible reaction of black employees "whose loyalty was not impugned in the slightest."

The documents were all disclosed in a case known as Halkin v. Helms, pending here in federal court. The plaintiff, Adele Halkin of Chicago, was a leader of the Women's Strike for Peace, an anti-war group. She says her mail was opened by the CIA and she was kept under surveillance by U.S. agents when she traveled to conferences overseas.