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Protecting Intelligence

Senator McCarthy's renewed assault on the Central Intelligence Agency, now that Congress is in recess, again raises the question of protection of vital national secrets. The Senator obviously is looking for a new issue to divert attention from his recent setbacks, and the Administration can no more afford to yield now to his attacks than it could a month ago. Some sort of legislative check on the operations of the Central Intelligence Agency, however, would help both to protect secrets and to prevent future fishing expeditions. Senator Mike Mansfield has introduced a resolution calling for the establishment of a Joint Committee on Central Intelligence to function in a manner similar to the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

It is of course preposterous to think that loose security precautions are a problem in CIA, as Senator McCarthy has insinuated. The real problem is not security but immunity from public scrutiny and criticism under the democratic process. Manifestly it is impossible to expose CIA's operations to public gaze without destroying the intelligence system. Indeed, the eminently successful British intelligence system is responsible only to "the government," meaning the Prime Minister, and, because of the trust in the civil servants, is virtually never mentioned on the floor of Parliament. But CIA's position with respect to Congress has never been precisely spelled out. Congress clearly gave to the director of Central Intelligence the responsibility for protecting sources of information; but it is improbable that, if put to a test, the refusal of a CIA official of a subpoena to testify on nonsecret information would be upheld.

In any event, a Joint Committee on Central Intelligence would focus the congressional responsibility in intelligence matters. A committee of 18 members as suggested by Senator Mansfield seems to us unwieldy; two members from each party in each house, say, would be preferable. Such a committee would serve to keep Congress informed generally of CIA policy and the efficiency of operations, and thus would help to keep the agency on its toes. By channelizing inquiries about intelligence matters, the committee also would help protect security. In lieu of the ordinary check through publicity that is impossible in the case of intelligence, a carefully chosen watchdog committee could both reassure the country and safeguard the agency from invasions by political demagogues.