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Spotlight On Intelligence

Senator Mansfield of Montana has introduced a resolution that on first view has a strong appeal. He proposes that Congress establish a Joint Committee on Intelligence, on the model of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, to keep Congress informed on the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency. There has been concern about some of CIA's activities that have seemed to be contrary to American foreign policy, and there is a commendable reluctance in Congress to see an agency operate outside the public view as CIA does. Senator Mansfield argues that "an urgent need exists for regular and responsible congressional scrutiny." Such scrutiny, he says, is essential to the success of our foreign policy, to the preservation of our democratic processes and to the security of CIA itself.

These are forceful arguments, and they would be convincing if the agency had any powers within the United States or over American citizens. But the agency does not; it operates only in the foreign field. It is a new type of organization for our country that no one can be confident will always stay within proper bounds. But its aims will be defeated if it is hampered by undue legislative interference in what is essentially an executive responsibility. If CIA were subject to no congressional check, Senator Mansfield's proposal would be extremely difficult to resist. However, the Armed Services Committees have a perfunctory knowledge of what is going on, and the Appropriations Committees pass on CIA's spending. Also, CIA makes periodic reports to the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. All this does not constitute close scrutiny, but another committee with broad powers to investigate might be one too many, and there would be additional opportunities for leaks, either by committee members or members of the committee staff.

CIA operates under the President and the National Security Council, and it works closely with the Budget Bureau and the State and Defense Departments. It does not give detailed accountings of its funds, as other agencies do, and its appropriations are hidden from public view. Secrecy is required by the nature of the operation. If there is to be an intelligence organization—and Congress created this one—its secrets must be protected. The primary responsibility for its activities must rest with the President rather than with Congress. CIA is one of the tools of the official responsible for the Nation's foreign and defense policies. He of all people should be the first to assure himself that it operates in conformity with established foreign policies.

If the President should fail in this respect, CIA would lose its usefulness and the confidence of Congress. When there is evidence that CIA has abused its authority or violated the statute under which it was established, Congress, of course, would have a right to demand an accounting even at the risk of harmful disclosures.