

Inciting Suicide

The revelation that the F.B.I. sent a communication to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. which he, not unreasonably, took as an attempt to push him to suicide, is surely the most loathsome of a startling number of indications that Congress has long been negligent in its responsibility to bring the bureau under control.

The concerted campaign to eliminate Dr. King as a force in American life was only the most visible of more than 2,300 efforts by the F.B.I., under its counter-intelligence program, to interfere illegally and improperly in the political processes of the United States and in the private lives of many American citizens. It is of little comfort that the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence estimates that "Cointelpro" operations succeeded only 23 percent of the time, because each of those successes represents human misery as well as a corruption of the political process, all accomplished on Government time at the taxpayers' expense.

The bureau's jurisdiction, beyond that of investigating Federal crimes, has been enlarged by a succession of Presidents. The perceived needs of the White House have extended from such legitimate activities as pursuing Nazi espionage agents during World War II to such outrages as bugging hotel rooms at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 and destroying evidence in 1972. Presidential latitude has been so broad and the bureau's relationship with Congress has been so close that under the late director, J. Edgar Hoover, the F.B.I. was virtually free to fill in whatever blank spaces in its jurisdiction it deemed appropriate.

Congress has never troubled itself to separate out

those activities which are necessary to the preservation of national security and those which are inimical to a free society, nor has it developed effective mechanisms of oversight and control. A sharp definition of the F.B.I.'s national security role is urgently required, as is a clear understanding of those activities which are permitted and those which are proscribed.

If proof of a 25-year campaign of harassment of the Socialist Workers' Party, a legitimate political organization, and an effort to drive an outstanding citizen to suicide cannot prod the Congress to erect such safeguards for freedom, it is hard to imagine what can.