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Leashing the CIA

We are now in the midst of the annual cloak-and-dagger scandal about the freewheeling CIA, a happening which regularly leads to hopes that Congress will finally bring the agency under effective control, except the hopes are always dashed. This year it may be different. But only maybe.

In the entire federal system there is nothing like the CIA. Unlike other agencies and departments of government, it alone is free of serious congressional accountability. It has often been a law unto itself, acting at times (before the Nixon-Kissinger era) even independently of the State Department.

Not even the supersensitive Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), which guards the most crucial secrets of all, is free of strict legislative supervision. At the very beginning of the dangerous new Atomic Age, the AEC was placed under firm congressional observation through the creation of the Joint Atomic Energy Committee, a solution which in practice has worked out extremely well over a long period of years.

Since 1948, when the CIA got going 150 resolutions have been introduced in Congress to provide different types of formal oversight of the agency, but it has unfailingly escaped being leashed. It now reports to a phony, informal congressional "watchdog" group, which hardly ever meets and never asks questions when it does.

The agency's chief argument against having exacting overseers is the alleged danger of "leaks." Opponents of the Joint Atomic Committee once said the same thing, but in over two decades there has never been a serious breach of security by the senators and representatives on that committee.

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Postscript

Now, because of the disclosures which have shown how the government, primarily through the CIA, secretly subverted a popularly elected government in Chile, there is renewed interest on Capitol Hill in creating a permanent Joint Committee on Intelligence Activities.

Congress has been "outraged" before by "black" CIA operations in other countries. This time, however, the outrage appears to be more than speech-deep, chiefly because the interference in Chile was not only crude but paved the way for a despotic military government that is currently engaged in a reign of repression. Of course, the Nixon-Kissinger regime also supported the generals who overthrew democratic government in Greece, but there the CIA role cannot yet be conclusively documented.

On Chile, though, the congressional investigators hit paydirt. Despite the denials under oath of high State Department officials that the United States meticulously kept hands off of domestic Chilean politics, Congress now has sworn testimony to the contrary from William Colby, the director of the CIA.

Colby's testimony that his agency, at White House orders, secretly spent \$8

million to undermine Salvador Allende, the popularly elected president of Chile, shows that Congress, if it is determined, can get the truth from the CIA. All it needs to do is to prove that it means business and that (as now proposed) it will seek perjury indictments if it is lied to.

The development that seems to have aroused the most new interest in Congress is a discovery that, during the Nixon-Kissinger administration, the black operations of the CIA (as in Chile) originated more in the White House than in the spy agency.

The last two chiefs of the CIA, Colby and his predecessor, Richard Helms, have both been career men. During their reign there has been less of the agency's old cloak-and-dagger adventurism, and there would have been still less had it not been for the White House. In the downfall of Mr. Allende, for instance, it is clear that Henry Kissinger, then the head of Nixon's National Security Council, was calling the signals on Chilean policy and CIA involvement.

If Congress were now to create a formal joint committee to oversee the CIA as a replacement for the present informal "watchdog" committee, it would be not only a restraint on the agency but a protection for it against abuses secretly ordered by the White House.

No President could improperly direct the agency to overthrow another government, say, without fear that the order would become known to members of the permanent overseeing committee. The right kind of overseeing might save a lot of mistakes all around, including ones like the Bay of Pigs disaster.