

Post 3/30/67

Sound CIA Recommendations

The basic recommendations of the President's committee on the Central Intelligence Agency's relationships with voluntary organizations overseas are admirable. The committee summary states:

1. It should be the policy of the United States Government that no Federal agency shall provide any covert financial assistance or support, direct or indirect, to any of the Nation's educational or private voluntary organizations.
2. The Government should promptly develop and establish a public-private mechanism to provide public funds openly for overseas activities of organizations which are adjudged deserving, in the national interest, of public support.

The adherence to the first policy and the prudent administration of the second should quiet the justifiable anxieties and misgivings roused by the disclosure of widespread secret CIA support for many organizations generally believed to be private and independent of government.

That it will take until the end of this year to carry the first recommendation into full effect is a little surprising and disappointing, but a government no doubt should carry out commitments even when it was unwise and imprudent to make them. The loophole left for exceptional cases where national security may be involved is a little disquieting. That much abused terminology has been used to launch all of the subsidies involved and will be unwisely invoked for future exceptions to the rule unless great restraint is exercised. The warranty that there will be no exceptions but those approved by the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State would be more reassuring if the report did not take pains to say that all the complained-of operations had the approval of "high-level senior interdepartmental review committees in the last four Administrations."

The plan for a publicly funded and privately administered body such as the British Council, to support cultural events abroad, will be awaited with interest. The mere fact of publicity removes much of the reproach arising from the old secret subsidies, but it will not remove all doubts about every such governmental subsidy. If many agencies in private life are to retain their usefulness and perform their essential function they must not have public or private connections with government. This is particularly true of the press and communications community upon which the public relies for information about and criticism of government. Moreover, it needs to be remembered that, as Kenneth Galbraith has put it: "It is the religion of liberal and civilized men that intellectual life is not in the service of the state; it is in the service of itself."

The President's Committee has made a plausible defense of some of the operations undertaken in a very critical time and under conditions that no longer obtain. The officials who authorized programs now widely reproached deserve a hearing and are entitled to understanding. But it must be said of them, as it was said of Walpole, who used British secret funds to achieve what he thought were important national purposes: "While he seemed to strengthen the superstructure, he weakened the foundation of our government."