

Another Handout for HISC Page 4/2/74

IN A BURST of misplaced generosity, the House of Representatives decided Monday, by a 247-86 vote, to shell out \$475,000 this year for the care and perpetuation of the House Internal Security Committee (HISC), formerly known as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). As the brevity of the floor debate suggests, the panel is less of an active menace than it used to be. The present chairman, Rep. Richard H. Ichord (D-Mo.), has toned things down quite a bit, so that the committee no longer stages mock trials and circuses, bullies witnesses, or engages in many of the other excesses which gave legislative investigations such a bad name a while ago.

HISC now is a costly irrelevance. Its staff of 42 (reduced by 12 over the past three years) has little serious legislative work to do, so—like all bureaucracies in need of justification—HISC has been casting about for new causes to take up. Last year the committee busied itself, so to speak, with aspects of several “emerging” issues such as prison unrest, Soviet trade, political kidnappings and life in mainland China. All of these, of course, are matters which fall nicely within the jurisdiction of other standing committees of the House.

HISC does have one operation which is, fortunately, unique. For some time much of its energy and staff has been devoted to maintaining its massive files. These consist of hundreds of thousands of dossiers containing newspaper clippings and other bits and pieces of information, sometimes decades old, on groups and individuals which, according to someone, might pose some kind of danger to the country. This raw material may be mined by any member of Congress and more than two dozen federal agencies. Last year, federal investigators submitted 56,706 names to be checked, and the HISC files came up with something of possible relevance about 11 per cent of the time.

This points to the basic trouble with HISC. It is engaged, in however desultory a way, in ferreting out what it considers to be “bad” opinions, “bad” associations and “bad” people in our midst. It is making judgments and distinctions which, under our system, should be made not by any governmental authority but by free citizens using their own judgment. Because HISC has been fairly quiet recently, it may be easier for the House to tolerate. But the chilling potential for abuse of citizens’ liberties will remain until the committee is abolished and its mandate taken off the books.