

Intelligence in Review

NYT 1/22/75
The Senate Democratic majority has taken an important initiative in proposing machinery for an independent and sweeping evaluation of the nation's intelligence systems, the first such assessment since 1947. The task demands political sensitivity and discretion; it holds a great potential for long-lasting impact both on national security and on civil liberties.

By the remarkably lopsided vote of 45 to 7, the Democratic Caucus rejected the viewpoint of Senator Stennis that the Central Intelligence Agency would be destroyed were it subjected to thorough and unbiased scrutiny. His proposal that only Senators already charged with C.I.A. oversight responsibilities could be trusted to carry on the evaluation was rebuffed, and rightly so.

Adequacy of oversight and accountability is one of the central questions before the inquiry, and it would make little sense to assign investigators from the ranks of those to be investigated. The Rockefeller Commission has already been criticized for lack of detachment; it would only compound the damage if the parallel Senate inquiry fell into the same trap.

For the sake of public credibility, on which the success of the whole enterprise ultimately depends, Majority and Minority Leaders Mansfield and Scott should capitalize on their broad license in choosing members for the new select committee, stressing intellectual honesty and diversity of approach above prior experience or exposure in the intelligence field. We only regret that the committee is not to be a joint creation of Senate and House.

Though much of the committee's analytical work will have to be done in closed sessions, insulated from the heat of immediate controversies, there is also a public education function.

The testimony of Central Intelligence Director William E. Colby before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee last week was a good example of how the public interest in disclosure can be served without violating the intelligence community's legitimate responsibilities for secrecy. Mr. Colby described many normally secret C.I.A. activities in the United States, relating to recruiting, security and logistical support. These seemed largely innocuous, and may help many on the outside to understand how an intelligence system works.

Enmeshed with these disclosures, however, was Mr. Colby's acknowledgment that the C.I.A. had indeed infiltrated agents into American dissident movements starting in the '60s. There were instances of physical surveillance of Americans, wiretaps and so-called "sur-reptitious entries" into citizens' homes. Mr. Colby and his predecessor, Richard Helms, are certainly entitled to argue that the agency's activities were not illegal, though theirs is hardly the last word. The judicial branch of government will have to determine whether the law has been broken.

The broader responsibility—and opportunity—of the Congress now is to assess whether the nation's intelligence community is set up to do the job properly required of it. This is an ambitious task, and may result in proposals for a restructuring of old established institutions. If the allotted nine months is too short a time to do the job responsibly, the committee should not be hurried into a half-baked conclusion.