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Editorials

The CIA campus caper

The first reactions were predictable. At the disclosure that the CIA had paid the National Student Association two or three million dollars to represent a "free society" at foreign student festivals, people began denouncing our spy chiefs for outfitting our innocent youths with cloaks and daggers. Then there were denunciations of the student politicians for secretly accepting funds that compromised the reputation of "independent scholarship." There were also those who reprimanded Congress for winking at all this.

But the criticisms couldn't keep up with the revelations. Every day there came new disclosures that the CIA and its foundation "fronts" have been supporting not just students but labor unions, radio stations, and all kinds of other groups that were willing to accept handouts. Finally, while traditionalists offered their traditional defense of the CIA as an organization too patriotic to be criticized, others began to ask whether the noble goal of espionage wasn't simply disguising pure extravagance. "Does it matter," remarked Russell Baker of *The New York Times*, "that European students assemble in Prague and write petitions at variance with United States foreign policy? What do we gain from having American students there? Is it worth real money to infect East European college youth with a taste for American fraternity songs? Perhaps so, but if so, someone should be willing to tell us why."

The traditionalists are right, of course, when they remind us that we need the CIA, and that it is absurd to shrink in horror from our own intelligence service. But just as information-gathering operations like the Bay of Pigs make one wonder whether the CIA knows the difference between intelligence and subversion, so the uproar over the student subsidies makes one wonder whether the CIA knows the difference between intelligence and propaganda. The elaborate apparatus of fake



foundations, secret grants and clandestine debriefings indicates that it does not.

It is worth remembering that the CIA must have thought it was doing good deeds, and that it had a perfect right to brief or de-brief its protégés. It is also worth remembering that many students had no inkling of their secret supporters and behaved as independently as anyone could wish. Only now, in retrospect, have they—and we—been made to look foolish. Beyond that, however, lies the basic question Mr. Baker asked: Do we really need all these international exchanges? If so, how many, and what kind, and what should they cost?

These are questions that the Administration, like previous administrations, gave up on. Knowing that congressional guardians of frugality like to excoriate overseas “cookie-pushing” and “boondoggling” in order to preserve the funds necessary for local road widening and fish hatcheries, the Administration found it easier to conceal in the CIA budget all kinds of activities that otherwise might not pass the test of public scrutiny.

But if our Government has been collectively exposed as a hypocrite, so has our nation as a whole. For years we have been told that, in contrast to monolithic Communism, our pluralistic society was willing and able to mobilize independent groups to do combat for what we like to call “our way of life.” Free students, we were told, set forth to debate the students of “captive nations.” Free labor unions, we were told, would organize other free labor unions. Free radio stations, we were told, should have our financial donations so that the truth could be broadcast to the captives. There is nothing tragic in the discovery that the CIA pays for such expressions of the “free world” in action. There is nothing inherently wrong with our using the same weapons and tactics that our antagonists use. Not unless the differences between us and those antagonists have ceased to concern us.