

Post 7/17/77

## The House Gets Into Intelligence

WHAT IS IT about the House that has kept it from focusing in a reasonably orderly and intelligent way, as the Senate has finally done, on the investigation and oversight of the intelligence community? Weak leadership? Trouble-begging rules? Accidents of personality? Whatever the answer, it was hardly a surprise that it took nothing less than a heavy-handed power play by Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, prompting a raucous and rancorous debate on the floor, for the House finally to establish an intelligence oversight committee the other day.

We are pleased that the House will now try to do what the Senate started doing more than a year ago. Any further delay on the House's part would have invited an indictment for gross institutional negligence. Yet the House's record of erratic behavior on matters of intelligence leaves little room for optimism about what it will do now.

The issue that most stirred the members in their debate on Thursday was the familiar one of secrecy. Senate experience has demonstrated that seemingly intractable differences of principle on this issue can be smoothed out in an atmosphere of mutual executive-congressional confidence. But the House has not developed that knack. "The President, the Vice President and the head of the CIA have asked us to plug up leaks on the Hill," Speaker O'Neill roared, as if pleasing the executive branch and saving the nation from the irresponsible leakers in the House were the principal aims of the exercise. To many members, of course, his appeal smacked of coverup.

The actual procedure accepted by the House does not seem so unreasonable: The access of other members to the committee's secrets will be limited. But it will be possible to appeal the committee's secrecy decisions to the full House. In any event, it is long past time for the House to stop restaging its old secrecy battles and get into serious oversight. Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson are no longer in the White House. The hope must be that ideological edges will blur as the new committee delves into substance. It's worth trying.

Speaker O'Neill's decision to put only four Republicans on the committee, as against nine Democrats, is something else. This enraged the Republicans, and understandably so. In intelligence oversight, where serious matters of no particular party concern are dealt with largely behind closed doors, there is special reason to avoid the appearance of partisanship. The Senate recognized as much by setting a ratio of nine Democrats to eight Republicans on its intelligence committee. The House committee, which is starting its life under plenty of other handicaps, did not need to be burdened with this additional one.

The chairman of the new committee, Edward P. Boland, is known as a trusted Massachusetts colleague of the Speaker. He has not previously demonstrated expertise, or even interest, in any of the areas for which his new committee has responsibility. It will be up to him to show that Mr. O'Neill's confidence in him is not misplaced.