

CIA—Yes, however!

The Senate Intelligence Committee has made its report on the nation's intelligence system, and painfully many are the excesses, abuses and mistakes charged thereto. Whether or not Congress and the administration now move to adopt reforms the committee recommends depends greatly on whether or not the American people really want reform.

Thanks to repeated leaks of testimony and documents during the course of the committee's 15-month investigation, the report contains no new revelations to jar the public. We have grown accustomed to the CIA's loss of face.

In sum, the investigators found that the Central Intelligence Agency had mounted 900 "major covert actions" since 1961, many of which were given little oversight by outside authorities and the value of which was at best questionable.

These ranged from assassination plots against unfriendly foreign leaders and covert financial and other support of friendly ones, to drug experiments on unsuspecting people to secret operation of business ventures in competition with private companies, plus a host of violations of the CIA's charter prohibiting domestic spying.

All or most of these activities have apparently been stopped or abandoned, which may explain the public's seeming indifference to erecting controls designed to ensure that they are not repeated in the future.

Although there is little evidence that any of the 900 covert actions served America's long-range interests — indeed, the preponderance of evidence points to the contrary — the reaction of many Americans seems to be that any kind of espionage is better than no espionage at all and that if there have been abuses, it is better not to

know about them than to expose our soiled lines to all view of the world.

Such a see-no-evil attitude could ultimately prove fatal to American democracy, however, thinks historian Henry Steele Commager, who argues that the United States got along very well from 1789 to 1941 without reliance on so much official secrecy and its companion, official lying.

"It's the business of our people to embarrass our government, that's what democracy is," he says. "Although the dangers of revelation are there, they are not serious and can never endanger the survival of the nation."

"But the dangers of secrecy may destroy the nation, and even mankind."

One aspect of official secrecy the Senate committee would end is that surrounding the total budget of the intelligence community. The people, it believes, should be permitted to make judgments on the nature and extent of the government's commitment to intelligence activities. The Ford administration is opposed to this, as well as to sharing oversight of intelligence activities with Congress.

Commager would go further and scrap the CIA and related organizations entirely because they are beyond reform. He suggests we start over again with the "comparatively innocuous" agencies that handled intelligence gathering before World War II.

Few Americans would probably go along with that, if only because the world has changed greatly since 1941 and the threats to democracy are far more sinister than they were in the

first 160 or so years of the nation's history.

But certainly, if we do nothing else, we must return the intelligence community to its original purpose for existence. That is, to gather the hard data on which this country's elected leaders can base sound policy judgments and wise decisions — not to engage in ventures which amount to policy-making of its own, ventures that we have seen have been not only foolish and counterproductive but at variance with American ideals.