

Sounding-Board for Slander *Post 7-8-64*

There is something frighteningly familiar about the two-bit circus that Senator John McClellan has been conducting lately under the auspices of his Permanent Investigations Subcommittee. The ostensible purpose of its current investigation is to look into the causes of college campus disorders, a form of inquiry now flagrantly fashionable and already undertaken redundantly by far more competent investigating bodies. The McClellan formula is wonderfully simple: offer congressional immunity from suits for libel or slander to any malcontent or crackpot who may want a free forum for expressing his crotchets or paying off old grudges.

This was the formula parlayed into a national frenzy by the late Senator Joseph McCarthy. It created an atmosphere in which Americans tended to look with distrust upon their fellow Americans and in which national security was sought through a general repression of individual freedom. It was surely one of the unhappiest times in American history.

Senator McClellan opened his show with an appearance by Eric Hoffer who set the tone for the investigation by saying of the rebellious students at Columbia University, "It would have been a wonderful thing if Grayson Kirk got mad and

got a gun and killed a few." But more serious than this sort of bloodthirsty nonsense has been the careless dropping of names by witnesses, denounced the other day by Senator Percy as "guilt by association of the worst type."

Senator Percy was roused to his thoroughly justified wrath by the testimony of a member of the Chicago Police Department's Subversive Unit who characterized a personal friend of the Senator as a contributor to Black Power and other radical groups. The sheer vagueness of this defamatory reference affords a pretty good measure of its value. Senator Percy pressed the policeman to be more specific about what groups the lady in Chicago had supported; but that expert on "subversion" said he could not do so "without reference to our files."

Not everyone slurred in a proceeding of this sort is lucky enough to have a senatorial friend on hand to spring to her defense. A committee of the United States Senate ought not to be lending itself to such carelessness. The purpose of the legislative investigating power is to enable Congress to obtain information necessary for legislation—not to punish people by publicity, without any semblance of due process and without affording them any chance to defend themselves.