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Monitoring Interpol

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"What is Interpol?" replied the staff counsel on the House Appropriations Treasury, Postal Service and General Government Subcommittee when asked about funding for the International Criminal Police Organization.

His reaction is not surprising. Few of the congressmen for whom he works seem to know what Interpol is or realize that they are considering its appropriation when they evaluate the Secretary of the Treasury's Program and Finance budget request each year.

With the current furor over intelligence-gathering's threat to the privacy of Americans, these congressmen would

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probably take a closer look if they knew some elementary facts about Interpol:

- It is made up of more than 120 governments representing all political persuasions.
- The members exchange information on suspected criminals by tapping each other's law enforcement files including, in our country, the FBI's computerized National Crime Information Center (NCIC).
- The National Central Bureau (NCB) in the United States, which operates out of the Treasury Department, has no guidelines limiting what information on Americans can be disseminated to other countries.

That congressmen on the subcommittee would not think to ask a question or say a word about Interpol at this year's mid-March hearing is partially explained by the organization's low profile. Because its dues payments for fiscal year 1976 amount to only \$140,000, Interpol barely showed up in the Secretary of the Treasury's \$28 million request.

Committees other than Appropriations have overlooked Interpol for other reasons. Nominally a private organization headquartered across the Atlantic in Paris, it does not fall neatly into the jurisdiction of any of the established oversight committees.

Interpol itself avoids Congress. Recently when one of the committees investigating intelligence sent out questionnaires seeking to identify which agencies should be scrutinized, Interpol replied that it was not worthy of consideration. "We did not fit into any

of the categories of intelligence they listed," said Louis Sims, chief of Interpol's U.S. National Central Bureau.

In a narrow sense, Sims is correct; strictly speaking, Interpol is not a member of the U.S. intelligence family. But it is at least a distant cousin freely sharing its resources and potential for abuse. Access to law enforcement information is just one example. Americans working for Interpol are on loan from the Secret Service (like Sims), the U.S. Customs Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and the Drug Enforcement Administration, the latter employing many "converted" CIA agents. Additionally, H. Stewart Knight, the director of the Secret Service, is a member of Interpol's executive committee.

According to Sims, 30 per cent of the cases handled by the U.S. NCB are drug-related. He said the other 70 per cent of the time is devoted to investigating smuggling, fraudulent securities and counterfeiting.

Not everyone agrees with Sims' breakdown. The Church of Scientology claims Interpol has encroached on its civil liberties. As a result, the Scientologists established the National Commission on Law Enforcement and Social Justice which, in addition to pointing up questionable practices, claims to have "documented" Nazi domination of Interpol. Among other things, it charges that Interpol has not cooperated in tracking down former Nazis.

With these revelations the Scientologists have generated some interest on Capitol Hill. U.S. Rep. Edward Beard (D-R.I.) has called for a General Accounting Office investigation into the

privacy issue and the Nazi affiliation.

Sen. Joseph Montoya (D-N.M.), who chairs the Senate Appropriations subcommittee, which like its counterpart in the House traditionally has not monitored Interpol, convened a special hearing yesterday. "The most important concern," he said, "is Interpol's possible threat to the constitutional rights of American citizens. We need to know, for instance, if the rules controlling the release of law enforcement information within the United States, say between Buffalo and Topeka, should also apply between Washington and Bucharest."

Montoya's initiative marks the first time Congress has seriously questioned the legitimacy and value of Interpol. However, the senator himself seemed

to recognize after two hours of firing questions at Sims and the three Treasury officials with him that more hearings are needed. Indeed it will take a long time to pin down exactly what Interpol does because many of the decisions made at the U.S. NCB are left to Sims' judgments, rather than to clearly defined guidelines.

More hazy than the U.S. bureau's operation is that of the central offices in France. Even the witnesses at Montoya's hearing plead ignorance on much of its activities. To be fully effective, future hearings must explore this murky area to answer what is probably the most important question of all: should the U.S. underwrite a burgeoning international data bank it cannot monitor?

No matter how zealous Congress becomes, it can oversee only the U.S. NCB. Interpol's central records, which in 1972 contained more than 1.5 million

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files on individuals, according to a report by Marine General Lewis Walt, are not subject to U.S. review. Neither is the president of Interpol, nor its member countries which include Communist nations (Yugoslavia and Romania) and from time to time some with which the U.S. has no diplomatic ties.

Interpol's central files are perhaps the severest threat to Americans' civil liberties. Even Sims is not sure what these records contain, although he has noted that when a member country makes a request of the United States, a copy of the transaction goes to the headquarters in France. In any case, once information is stored in Paris, countries can use it without going through the U.S. bureau.

In all fairness, no transgressions have been proved. Whether this is the result of insufficient monitoring or because Interpol is not guilty of any wrongdoing may be debatable. What is not in doubt is that the potential for abuse exists and becomes more serious as Interpol continues to grow—which it is. Between 1969 and 1974 the number of cases handled annually by the U.S. NCB increased 1,300 per cent. According to Sims, this was the result of a massive public relations campaign by his predecessor to explain to local authorities what Interpol can do for them. Sims said continuance of this PR effort is one of his primary responsibilities.

In addition to this, the number of law enforcement files in the United

States continues to mount. And the FBI is now suggesting that the NCIC be authorized to hold a wider variety of data.

The danger of leaving unchecked agencies whose operations can so easily be perverted to undermine constitutional guarantees has become appallingly obvious. In the case of Interpol, an international agency more difficult to control, the pitfalls are deeper and demand that Congress ensure our participation does not follow the recently reported abuses of the CIA and FBI.