

SACB

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Curbing Freedom of Association

There are two principal arguments against providing public money to finance the Subversive Activities Control Board—something the Senate is supposed to decide today. One argument is purely pragmatic: the agency is useless—totally, completely, unequivocally and indisputably useless. The courts have found the functions for which it was created 20-odd years ago to be unconstitutional; and there is simply no way to pursue its purpose that would not subvert and impair the Constitution.

Senator Proxmire, who has been leading a fight to put the board out of harm's way by denying its appropriation request, said of it in an interview the other day: "Its sole purpose was to provide a registry of Communists and subversives in this country. But during the 20 years of its existence it has never registered any Communists or subversives—not a single one. For two and a half years the board didn't even hold a single hearing. Then Congress changed the law. As a result of the new law, since the beginning of the year, the board heard a grand total of exactly three witnesses. It still hasn't registered anyone. It hasn't even come close. The SACB is a monumental exercise in futility."

The senator is precisely right in his statistics. But the SACB is supposed to register organizations as well as individuals. After due deliberation, which must have used up several hours of its members' time during the past 20 years, it issued a final order determining that the Communist Party USA is a "Communist-action organization" within the meaning of the law. And it issued seven orders denouncing organizations it didn't like as "Communist fronts." That is all it did—except, perhaps, for holding annual parties at Christmas-time, compiling annual reports on its annual idleness and, of course, cashing or depositing those government paychecks which amount in the case of each of the five board members to \$36,000 a year. It must be exhausting.

What with secretaries, assistants and other staff to help the board members, the SACB is asking for \$450,000 for the fiscal year ahead. The Senate could more equitably and with far greater service to the national security use that tidy sum to buy the Washington Senators a couple of good pitchers and another long-ball hitter.

There is, however, an argument against extending the life of the SACB far more fundamental than the waste of public funds involved. President Nixon has proposed that the board be put to work listing voluntary associations of which it thinks, in its collective wisdom, that Americans shouldn't be members. Throughout the American past the choice as to what organizations to get into or to stay out of was left entirely up to the Americans themselves. Indeed, this was considered an elementary American freedom, guaranteed by the First Amendment as a cornerstone of the American political system.

Voluntary associations have been, much more than political parties, the motive force of the democratic process in this country. They are the characteristic American device for getting things done. Alexis de Tocqueville recognized their importance when he looked at the American scene 130 years ago. "In countries where associations are free," he wrote, "secret societies are unknown. In America there are numerous factions, but no conspiracies. The most natural privilege of man, next to the right of acting for himself, is that of combining his exertions with those of his fellow-creatures, and of acting in common with them." It is this natural right of free men which President Nixon would now authorize the SACB to curtail by putting the brand of official disapproval on dissident groups.

There is a quick, easy, effective and apt way to put a stop to this meddlesome interference with freedom of association and that is for the Senate to vote today against any appropriation for the SACB.