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On Intelligence

Interminable discussion of the need for greater Congressional oversight of the United States intelligence community—the subject has flickered through more than 150 abortive legislative proposals over the past 27 years—inevitably runs into a bedrock question: How do you oversee something that, at its essence, depends on not being seen?

The history of Congressional and public interest in the Central Intelligence Agency is studded with short-lived flaps, triggered by some sensational disclosures of exploits that went wrong; a flurry of investigative activity results in proposals for reform, sometimes meaningful, sometimes illusory, always piecemeal. Since the creation of the agency by the National Security Act of 1947 there has been no deep-reaching or systematic inquiry into the fundamental role of an intelligence system for the United States.

In this field, as in many other facets of public policy, prevailing assumptions have been allowed to remain unquestioned far too long. No one outside the C.I.A. really knows whether it is doing an efficient job, as Senator Mansfield once put it; whether it is overstaffed, whether it duplicates work of other agencies, whether it gets into operations where it has no business, whether it wastes money, whether it interferes with the conduct of foreign policy. This indictment of frustration is no new reaction to the latest disclosures; the Senator made the remarks twenty years ago. With all the blue-ribbon commissions and special studies since, they remain essentially true today.

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The new Congress is about to open in another flurry of agitation for hauling in the reins on the C.I.A. There are two separate processes under way and, in our view, no genuine improvement can come about unless both processes are pursued in parallel.

First is the need to investigate the specific allegations of illegal domestic surveillance operations in violation of the C.I.A. charter. Here the Congress has an urgent responsibility to supplement, from a viewpoint of greater detachment, the investigation already begun by a Presidential commission headed by Vice President Rockefeller. Given energetic leadership, a joint House-Senate *ad hoc* committee could be a suitable vehicle for this investigation, avoiding the risks of fragmenting the subject into oblivion—or sensationalism—through rival investigations by competing standing committees.

Such a joint committee would be most effective and credible to the public at large if its composition reflected the diversity of approach that exists in Congress; lack of such diversity is the greatest shortcoming in the Rockefeller commission.

In parallel to this investigation, the Congress has a ready opportunity to address the longer-term problem. Late last session, Senators Mansfield and Mathias proposed the creation of a bipartisan select committee of the Senate to conduct over two years just the detailed examination of this country's intelligence requirements that has been lacking since 1947.

Three decades is too long for any public institution to function without a fundamental reappraisal of its role, especially an institution that of necessity has to function in secret. Both the genuine intelligence needs of the nation and the equally legitimate requirements for oversight and accountability need a solid new definition. A select committee study, removed from the politically charged atmosphere of the moment, could provide the basis for such a reappraisal.