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The CIA Boomerang

The inquiry into the Central Intelligence Agency has boomeranged on those who promoted the fuss in the first place. To be sure, the agency did go off the reservation.

But it is not emerging as a secret monster that poses a threat to basic American liberties. On the contrary, the CIA is now being shown to lack the clout, over its own personnel and with other agencies, required for its basic mission.

The charges leveled against the agency last month centered around two main themes. First there was the assertion that the CIA had committed illegal actions by spying on Americans in the United States in violation of its charter. In support of that charge, reference was made to break-ins, surveillance, opening of mail, and the maintenance of files on American citizens.

Secondly, it was claimed that the illegalities were "massive." To sustain that imputation, it was repeatedly asserted that the agency file on Americans included nearly 10,000 names.

Both these charges were addressed last week in public testimony by the director of the CIA, William Colby, to a subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Mr. Colby said that except in a tiny number of cases, which he enumerated, the surveillance and break-ins had to do with CIA investigation of its own personnel.

Most of the 10,000 names in the file were picked up in pursuit of activities

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by Americans abroad—some of them in the anti-Vietnam war movement who then returned to the United States. Given the size of the agency's operation, and of this country, the 10,000-name file is not inconsistent with Colby's claim that "the agency did not conduct a massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation."

To be sure, testimony by Mr. Colby is subject to doubt. He has an interest in clearing his agency and his own past, which doesn't exactly smell like Chanel No. 5.

But Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who briefly preceded Mr. Colby as director of the agency, has no axe to grind. He had no previous experience at the CIA. He himself uncovered most of the dubious practices and put an end to them. If anything, his interest would dictate exaggerating the wrongdoing he discovered and stopped.

But his testimony to the presidential commission set up after the charges were made seems to bear out the Colby story. After testifying, Mr. Schlesinger told a press conference that while the CIA activities in ques-

tion were "to be regretted" and "inappropriate," they were not "in such number or so surprising as to be a source of national turmoil."

Even as it developed that the charges were exaggerated, real weaknesses in the CIA emerged. It is clear for one thing that former agency employees are now blabbing in a big way. Since the agency has no control over former employees, there is a genuine danger that much of the CIA's apparently secret operation will come unraveled.

The more so as grudges nursed over the years are now being indulged in a way that recalls the witch hunts of the McCarthy period. It seems, for example, that at least one CIA operative, James Angleton, was fired for actions which had nothing to do with the charges.

Finally, it appears that the CIA got into some domestic activities because of the special character of the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover. For instance, the inspection of mail, directed by the Eisenhower administration, was as-

signed to the CIA because at the time Hoover was feuding with postal officials. In other words, at a time when the country was concerned about the Communist threat to national security, the President was obliged to use the CIA in order to achieve a purpose formally assigned to the FBI.

The correction of these weaknesses—weaknesses which seem to me far more serious than the original charges—can only be achieved by a new set of guidelines for the CIA. None of the groups now looking into the agency can give good guidance on such matters. The regular committees of Congress—whichever have, or have claimed, oversight responsibilities—are interested parties with very limited competence. They are not to be trusted on such business.

Neither is the presidential commission headed by Vice President Rockefeller. Its mandate is too narrow, its bias is too far to the right, and it lacks, both in membership and in staff, expertise on intelligence matters.

But there is one group which could appropriately set new guidelines for the agency. That is the select committee of the Senate, proposed by Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and the liberal Republican Charles Mathias of Maryland. It can be given the appropriate mandate and be so composed that it will be broadly competent and sensitive to both individual liberty and national security.