

Future of the C.I.A.

The Congressional investigations of activities conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency in violation of its charter and of the laws have been essential to re-establishment of public trust in the Federal Government's badly eroded integrity. These inquiries have turned a valuable spotlight on past abuses and provided information on which to base reforms necessary to prevent this dismal chapter of the nation's history from repeating itself. Since the House committee has gone out of business with no apparent move toward remedial legislation, the task of initiating reforms now rests with the Senate. Future abuses cannot be prevented by mere reliance on the investigations' shock effect.

The findings of these inquiries indicate strong warrant for prosecution of specific unlawful acts, but infinitely more important even than such redress for past transgressions is the need for a clearer understanding of the legitimate and necessary role the C.I.A. still must play. To safeguard that role and to insure that it will be fulfilled under effective control by both the President and Congress now become the first order of business.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, fed by romantic fiction and cloak-and-dagger television dramas, modern intelligence relies heavily on observation by satellites and other technological information-gathering devices. Research is fundamental in keeping the nation's defense and diplomatic establishment informed. It, in turn, must be augmented by personal contacts between the C.I.A. and foreign nationals, with protection against irresponsible public exposure of those involved indispensable.

Many of the past excesses resulted from a dangerous misinterpretation of the C.I.A.'s mission as a secret political force to wage undercover mini-revolutions and to forge plots against factions or persons it deemed inimical to American goals and policies. This same departure from its basic intelligence-gathering task eventually also propelled the C.I.A. into domestic espionage and political meddling as an extension of these dubious activities abroad.

Recent events in Angola are only the latest example of the unacceptable risk involved in embroiling the United States in foreign conflicts without a mandate from Congress and the American people. Placing the American role abroad beyond debate and control by the people jeopardizes the entire democratic process.

Exploiting adverse popular reaction to Congressional leaks of C.I.A. data as well as sympathy created for the agency by the outrageous assassination of one of its representatives in Greece, the Administration has tried to gain support for a return to executive-branch control, secrecy and "self-policing" of the type that proved so disastrous in the past.

There are obvious risks in a sharing of information concerning delicate foreign operations between Congress and the White House; but they are risks inherent in democratic government, and as such they are infinitely less fraught with danger than exempting from accountability operations vital to the nation's world position.

There need be no contradiction in reforms which simultaneously aim at protecting the vital mission of the C.I.A. as an effective intelligence-gathering force and at insuring effective Congressional oversight to prevent that mission from subverting the Constitution and ignoring the will of the American people.