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Controlling the F.B.I.

From time to time since the death of J. Edgar Hoover, members of Congress and others have murmured quietly about the need to impose more reliable controls on the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Perhaps Congress will be jolted out of its slumbers by the revelations about the Central Intelligence Agency's illegal intrusions into the domestic security field, coupled with some devastating observations by William C. Sullivan, formerly Number Three man in the F.B.I., on its abuses and ineptitude in handling this responsibility—a responsibility it botched from the start.

Mr. Sullivan argues that the F.B.I. was not equipped to undertake the domestic security function when President Roosevelt first gave it the assignment in 1939 and that no really effective or controlled program was ever developed. As a result, the activity was susceptible to abuse, as when the bureau accepted such "purely political" assignments as checking up on opponents of lend-lease for President Roosevelt and opponents of the Vietnam war for President Johnson. Moreover, microphones, telephone taps and other electronic devices were among the program's principal tools. Mr. Sullivan notes that their use constituted invasion of privacy and, in some cases, violations of the Bill of Rights. Mr. Sullivan is not sure that a domestic security program is necessary for the nation, but he is quite clear that if it continued, it should be taken away from the F.B.I.

During his stint as Deputy Attorney General, William Ruckelshaus was planning a searching review of its functions and operations, but the "Saturday night massacre" killed that plan. The undisciplined helter-skelter growth of the F.B.I. has never been checked or seriously analyzed. If the Department of Justice does not have the heart for resurrecting Mr. Ruckelshaus' proposed review, it is up to Congress to undertake both the hard analysis and the tasks of supervision and oversight which it has neglected for so long.