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An F.B.I. Inquiry

Recent disclosures concerning the Federal Bureau of Investigation make clear that a Congressional review of the agency's numerous and far-ranging activities is necessary. Appropriations subcommittees perform some of this Congressional function. With regard to the F.B.I., however, these subcommittees have long since reduced themselves to the role of claques dutifully applauding for J. Edgar Hoover.

It is disappointing that Senator Ervin of North Carolina, chairman of the subcommittee on constitutional rights, has shown himself reluctant to look into the F.B.I.'s work. This subcommittee is the logical group to conduct an inquiry into issues of F.B.I. policy that have aroused public uneasiness because they relate to grey areas where legality is not clearly defined. It may well be that a Congressional inquiry would show the need for revising the law.

There is also concern about Mr. Hoover. This concern is heightened by the growing public awareness that for decades, most Attorneys General have feared Mr. Hoover's political influence and have negotiated with him as a sovereign entity, instead of supervising him as a subordinate. The effusive endorsements of Mr. Hoover in recent days by President Nixon and Attorney General Mitchell suggest that top-level supervision within the executive is no firmer under this Administration.

The revelation that F.B.I. agents monitored last year's Earth Day rallies implies that undercover work against violent conspirators has been widened into a wasteful, inefficient dragnet covering all kinds of peaceful politics.

These problems as well as the belief by several Congressmen that the F.B.I. taps telephones on Capitol Hill are deserving of sober evaluation. Senators Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and John V. Tunney of California, members of the Ervin subcommittee, have proposed that it undertake an inquiry. As Senator Ervin recognizes, such an inquiry would be controversial. But who supposed that the defense of individual liberty could ever be non-controversial?