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Subversion by C.I.A.

The disastrous effects of the systematic penetration of American educational, cultural and labor organizations by the Central Intelligence Agency daily become more apparent. The strength of these organizations, both in the structure of American society and in their relations with their opposite numbers in other nations, always has been their freedom from government domination.

Now, through the deviousness of C.I.A. operations, thousands of scholars, students, unionists and professional leaders discover long after the fact that they have performed unwitting and undesired duty as secret agents.

The integrity of pro-American positions, honestly taken by groups and individuals in the worldwide battle of ideas, has been undermined. The independence of America's private foundations has been brought into question. In short, faith in American institutions has been besmirched in a way that would have eluded the reach of any foreign enemy.

It is no excuse to say that the C.I.A.'s decision to use a limitless range of philanthropic fronts to funnel its funds into youth groups, universities and other private institutions was designed to meet a very real problem of the cold war: the need for assuring that the Communists would not have an unchallenged field in the youth congresses and cultural conferences they were arranging—and subsidizing—on a global basis ten and fifteen years ago. That problem should have been met openly—by direct public subsidy.

It should have been clear long ago to the C.I.A.'s overseers in the White House that the end effect of clandestine subsidies to groups representative of the detachment and diversity of a free society must inevitably taint the genuineness of their detachment. This would be true even without the charges that have now developed of the assignment of C.I.A. operatives to influence the policy statements and choice of officers of the National Student Association—a practice that may have extended to other organizations as well.

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The health of a democratic society depends on the certainty that its free institutions—its press, its educational and scientific bodies, its publishing houses and television networks, its unions and business organizations—are truly free. That does not mean government is barred from underwriting international exchanges or research study; it means that, where such support is appropriate, it must be given openly through its own public agencies.

The worst part of the current mess is that the very nature of the C.I.A., with its mandate for espionage and subversion all over the world, rules out any thoroughgoing public inquiry into its activities. That means some residue of suspicion is sure to remain—both in this country and abroad—no matter how conscientiously the Cabinet Committee appointed last week by President Johnson seeks to formulate policies that will prevent the C.I.A. or any other Federal bureau from imperiling the "integrity and independence" of educational institutions.

When a government finds it necessary to set up an agency to fight subversion with subversion everywhere, the tragic danger it opens up is that among the people it subverts are its own. The defense against such weakening of America's institutional fabric must rest with the President and Congress. Even with the recent broadening of Senator Russell's watchdog committee, Congress is not doing its part of that job.