

editorial

Supervising the C.I.A.

In every respect it was a shoddy performance of the Senate majority in barring members of the Foreign Relations Committee from a panel that keeps watch over the Central Intelligence Agency.

Here was the Senate Establishment—the “Club”—at its stuffy worst, when one of its powerful elders, Mr. Russell of Georgia, put the controversy in terms of Senator Fulbright's “muscling in” on “my” committee. One might have expected the self-respect of the other members of the C.I.A. panel to assert itself against such petty possessiveness.

From what is known of that part of the debate held in secret, Mr. Russell and his supporters refused to come to grips with the problem that had inspired Senator Eugene McCarthy's proposal. Could any of the 61 who voted to keep the Foreign Relations Committee away from the C.I.A. argue seriously against Mr. Fulbright's point that the C.I.A. “plays a major role in the foreign policy decision-making process,” and thus exerts “a substantial influence” on American foreign relations?

If that statement of the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee is accepted, it follows logically that the Senate committee with responsibility for foreign relations should have a role in any intelligence supervision undertaken by the Congress. And it makes sense to establish a regular Senate committee with a professional staff for this surveillance or a joint committee, as in the case of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

Senator Russell declined debate on this level, however. He preferred to brand the proposal “self-serving and self-seeking,” and to hint that Foreign Relations members would be less discreet with state secrets than Senators from the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees who make up the existing, informal C.I.A. panel.

The Georgia elder discredited not Senators Fulbright and McCarthy but himself. The sixty Senators who sustained his point of order and sent the McCarthy resolution to certain death in the Armed Services Committee tarnished only the “Club's” image.

This is not the end of the debate, however, for too many Americans remain uneasy about an agency that has appeared on too many occasions to be affecting the foreign policy of the United States without sufficient control or supervision.