

The Hidden Hand of Government in Books

It is sometimes difficult to have much faith in those who object on "free enterprise" grounds to encroachments of the federal government into the private domain.

Take the release last December of House Appropriations Committee testimony at hearings into the budget of the U.S. Information Agency which showed \$195,000 for "book development."

The government has a Printing Office, but USIA spokesman Reed Harris wasn't talking about this aspect of publications when he told Congressmen that "book development" involved a program that allows his agency to "have books written to our own specifications, books that would not otherwise be put out, especially those books that have strong anti-Communist content, and follow other themes that are particularly useful for our purposes.

"Under the book development program we control the thing from the very idea down to the final edited manuscript," said Harris. "The thing" is a book, although if it sounds from the statement like a can of corn or an advertising program, such a commodity-packaging approach as Harris outlined makes distinctions unclear.

Well, none of this brought much denunciation down upon the bureaucracy heads from those champions of laissez faire government who say "meddling" when they see federal aid to education, medical schools, medicare and what have you.

The key, perhaps, is found in Washington's choice of what to subsidize. You can pretty much knock communism (or hire somebody to knock it for you) without stirring up the consensus. But then where does it stop?

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THE USIA, pressured by the House committee, has now released the list of books subsidized by it during fiscal 1965. One of the items was \$1,770 for the Bantam paperback edition of "The Witnesses," the New York Times' prepared editing of the 26 volumes of testimony taken by the Warren Commission before preparing its celebrated report.

The report is now the center of violent controversy which pits a government document against critics from both the private sector and a growing number of concerned congressmen who feel the issues have not been resolved.

"The Witnesses" was supposedly the assessment of a respected and objective neutral source (as seen in its introduction by Harrison Salisbury), followed by a representative selection from the corroborating evidence.

What does USIA subsidization of that "objectivity" do to the credibility of the book? A book that does not

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concern communism, but rather a burning public question.

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THE USIA, after releasing the list of books it subsidized during fiscal 1965, attempted to sweeten the pill by announcing, according to Publishers' Weekly, "that it was relaxing its editorial supervision with regard to books it will subsidize in the future."

To USIA's claim that the books are vital to the agency's overseas progaganda operation, Rep. Glenard Lipscomb, the California Republican, asked:

"Why not limit your activities for overseas? You are making a subsidy to the author and the publisher. The taxpayer is not complaining about it, but there is a principle involved in my mind that when an American citizen who subsidizes a book reads it, he should know (it is subsidized)."

Perhaps, as I. F. Stone suggested, "The publishing business needs a pure food and drug act of its own which will require that books subsidized by the government be plainly labeled."

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WALLACE STEGNER, director of Stanford's Creative Writing Center, believes one of the casualties of contemporary modes of intellectual revolt may well be the short story.

"By all the evidence," writes Stegner, "we are undergoing a profound, swift change from an essentially rational (however mad) society built on Greece and Rome, and a body of traditional thought painstakingly assembled, to a society which asserts itself more and more as irrational, mystical and terpsichorean.

"Traditions, including traditional forms in art, go down; the youth who trusts no one over 30 is no devotee of the Great Books. His aim — call it rather a drive — seems to be not to keep his head but to lose it; he wants not clarity but ecstasy, not understanding but hallucination.

"When the apocalyptic writer writes what he calls a short story, he more often than not produces something authentically short, but not authentically story: an open-ended sketch, a whirling gust of images, an impression, a howl, a free hand map of the author's mind . . ."

People have been predicting the demise of the story for years now, and the form is, in fact, in difficulty as far as available markets go. Fewer and fewer magazines want them and I know of no one earning a living or establishing a reputation on short stories alone.

Stegner's remarks, it should be stated however, come from his introduction to "Twenty Years of Stanford Short Stories" (Stanford Press; \$6.95), edited by Stegner and Richard Scowcroft and containing 29 stories by such writing center products as Tillie Olsen, Dennis Murphy, Eugene Burdick and Merrill Joan Gerber.