

F.B.I.'s Persistence

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is nothing if not persistent. As far back as last October its plan to give its computerized information system a new capacity to permit it to monitor state and local law enforcement communications ran into a storm of protest from both Capitol Hill and the White House. Undaunted, the F.B.I. kept at it and, according to proposals recently published in the Federal Register, still intends to press to acquire the capacity for information control.

As is usual in such cases, the proposed expansion of the bureau's reach is justified under the innocent guise of efficiency. And, as is also usual, the technological capacity to cast a wider net is being used to shoulder aside important issues concerning citizen privacy and the appropriate balance between Federal and state law enforcement responsibilities.

Fortunately the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, Senator Roman Hruska, former Senator Sam Ervin and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration are pointing to issues the F.B.I. seeks to avoid. The L.E.A.A. has argued inside the Government that the F.B.I. proposal raises concern over "(a) the development of the 'Big Brother' system; (b) reduced state input and control over security, confidentiality and the use of state originated data and (c) increased dangers resulting from use of non-updated, and hence inaccurate, centrally maintained 'rap sheets.'"

Against the still-emerging background of the bureau's history of dossier-collection and its variety of counter-intelligence programs, its rejoinder that it "has long recognized . . . the sanctity of the privacy of the individual" is hardly reassuring. Furthermore, its insistence on plowing ahead despite strong opposition all over the Government raises basic questions about the adequacy of the regular oversight mechanisms of the Congress.

The conflict between bureau policies and competing claims for privacy cannot be handled effectively on an ad hoc basis. Consistent and coherent Congressional supervision is needed. Given the lethargic history of the subcommittee on F.B.I. oversight headed by Senator James O. Eastland in the Senate, the real hope for trenchant Congressional participation in the governance of the F.B.I. lies with the subcommittee chaired by Representative Don Edwards of California in the House. An issue deserving energetic examination is the bureau's continued insistence on pushing its technological tentacles deep into the province of state and local police departments.