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LBJ Should Spike CIA 'McCarthyism'

IN HIS COLUMN of comment on this page yesterday, Richard Wilson had some caustic things to say about the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). Given the circumstances, Wilson could hardly have been too caustic.

For, to put the matter in harsh, essential terms, the CIA is proposing to make "McCarthyism" an instrument of official, domestic policy.

Involved is a civil slander suit: One Estonian emigre is suing another for slander, the second having called the first a Soviet secret police agent. The CIA gets into it because the accused slanderer is an admitted, occasional CIA agent, and his superiors say he made his allegedly slanderous remarks on their orders.

Worse, the CIA claims its man is immune from court action, asserting that he is covered by the same immunity that protects members of Congress from actions based on statements

made in the House or Senate, an immunity which has been extended to some degree to senior, policy-making officials in the executive branch.

This is a pernicious doctrine indeed, one whose effects could be felt long after the present case is forgotten. Any CIA or FBI official or bureaucratic hatchet-man could call any citizen a Communist, Fascist, moral leper, or what have you and escape behind a barrier of "immunity." In the CIA's case the offense is compounded by the claim that "evidence" to support the alleged slander must remain secret.

We hope the federal courts give short shrift to this mischief-making proposition. However, we can see no reason why President Johnson, whose responsibility the CIA is and who just last week reaffirmed his dedication to civil rights, should not meanwhile countermand his agency's anti-libertarian policy.