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Running Secrecy Into the Ground

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this week, only hours before the bill was to come up for debate, the CIA asked that it be removed from the Senate calendar.

Despite periodic demands that it be made more accountable to the government it was established to serve, the Central Intelligence Agency continues to operate on the assumption that it is a law unto itself.

The latest manifestation of this undemocratic arrogance is the CIA's successful 11th-hour attempt to block Senate debate this week on the so-called "right to privacy" bill, which was filed last year by Democratic Senator Sam J. Ervin of North Carolina and 54 co-sponsors.

This bill had its origin in a flood of complaints from federal job applicants who found themselves subjected to lie detector tests in which they were grilled about their religious beliefs, sex habits, and anything else that the questioners thought might affect their reliability. The bill would limit federal agencies from asking questions unrelated to the job applicants' prospective duties except in specific cases where it could be deemed necessary to protect the national security.

Twice in the past two years the CIA has been asked to testify at public hearings on this legislation. Both times it declined to do so. But on Monday of

Although such a request from a federal agency is wholly without precedent, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield postponed the scheduled debate. Now the CIA is demanding a secret Judiciary Committee hearing — a demand which the committee is apparently, and wisely, disinclined to grant.

In effect, what the CIA (supported by the National Security Agency, its Pentagon counterpart) is saying is that its hiring practices are its own business and nobody else's, not even the Senate's. Further, it is saying that it isn't even obliged to state publicly its reasons for demanding this right to freedom from legislative control. "They want," said Senator Ervin yesterday, "the unmitigated right to kick federal employees around, deny them respect for individual privacy, and deny them the basic rights which belong to every American regardless of the mission of his agency."

Obviously an intelligence agency has to conduct many of its operations in secrecy. But this doesn't give it the right to total immunity from outside supervision. The Senate, which is extremely jealous of its own prerogatives in most matters, should refuse to knuckle under to the CIA in this one.