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A Look Into CIA's Impact

Sen. Eugene McCarthy has revised an issue smoldering since 1956 and given it a new twist. Basically the idea is that there should be better congressional oversight of the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Ten years ago, Sen. Mike Mansfield, D-Mont., now Senate Majority leader, joined 34 cosponsors in urging a Joint Congressional Committee on Central Intelligence. This was a concept first envisioned by the late Sen. Brien McMahon, who led the fight to create the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. It seems to us that the atomic energy committee has worked well, without jeopardizing national security in a field fully as sensitive as intelligence.

McCarthy's proposal is less ambiguous but perhaps more pointed. He wants either a select Senate committee or, preferably, a new subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to investigate CIA's impact on foreign policy. How far has CIA moved from its initial assignment of gathering, analyzing and coordinating intelligence information into the field of influencing, even making, foreign policy?

CIA activities are now irregularly and rather cursorily reviewed by subcommittees of the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees. Surely the Foreign Relations Committee has an equal interest in those activities.

The investigation proposed by McCarthy would have to be exceptionally discreet, but it should be made. And we think it might lead to a joint congressional committee to keep a legislative eye on an agency with disturbing power to alter the course of the United States in world affairs or at least trigger dangerous incidents.