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Congress Is Crippling the CIA

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Charged with "overseeing" U.S. intelligence, too many lawmakers, with too many political axes to grind, are leaking too many vital secrets. It's time to plug the holes

AT 5 A.M. ON OCTOBER 11, 1985, a stretch limousine carrying Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.) pulled up to CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. Vice chairman of the powerful Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Leahy had asked for a full briefing on the *Achille Lauro* hijacking. But why before dawn?

Because Leahy had agreed to appear on the CBS "Morning News" at 7 a.m. to comment on the interception by U.S. pilots of the hijackers' plane. Following his meeting, Leahy, who now possessed every secret in the case, was driven directly to CBS studios in Washington. "It's a major triumph for the United States," reported Leahy. Then he made an extraordinary disclosure: "When [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak went on the news yesterday and said the hijackers had left Egypt, we knew that wasn't so. Our intelligence was very, very good."

Leahy had inadvertently tipped intelligence specialists from Cairo to Moscow that the United States had intercepted Mubarak's phone calls and heard that the *Achille Lauro* hijackers were still in Egypt. The conversations had been "read" by communications intelligence and flashed to computers in Fort Meade, Md., where the National Security Agency daily monitors thousands of intercepted voice signals.

The disclosure would bring Egyptian countermeasures to safeguard subsequent telephone calls. Every government in the world took note, and reacted by tightening security on communications. Leahy insisted to an incensed CIA director William Casey that Administrative officials had publicly disclosed the hijackers' whereabouts the day before he went on TV.

This incident is one of many showing that the current era of Congressional oversight of the CIA is simply not working. Instead, the Senate and House Intelligence Committees have become conduits for classified information. CIA efforts to

thwart international terrorist actions or to lend support to anti-communist guerrillas are difficult enough, but keeping those operations secret has become nearly impossible. And vital intelligence-sharing by U.S. allies has been severely hampered by concerns in foreign capitals over the leakage of information passed to Washington.

Pattern of Leaks. Under the present oversight system, the 31 members of the House and Senate committees, plus more than 60 staff members, are informed of proposed covert operations. "Any one of these people who does not believe in an operation can appoint himself or herself to stop it," says Rep. Michael DeWine (R., Ohio). "All they need to do is call a reporter." Thus, the ability to make or break government policy is widely dispersed.

Congressional leaks concern Rep. Henry Hyde (R., Ill.), a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He has bluntly scolded colleagues, reminding them that with Congress's "need to know" for oversight purposes "goes the overriding responsibility to keep much of that information secret."

The impact on U.S. relations with allies has been severe. Casey has testified that leaks "do more damage than anything else" to U.S. intelligence and to "our reputation and reliability" among allies. In fact, concern about American leakage has spread across the world, often disrupting U.S. policy. For

operations of the U-2 spy plane.

Until 1974, a small group of senior members of Congress worked with floor leaders of both parties as an informal oversight panel. They were briefed by the CIA director himself, usually without Congressional staff present.

But questionable domestic surveillance activities, assassination plans, and other abuses by the CIA in the 1970s led to the branding of the agency as a "rogue elephant," transforming that collegial atmosphere. A rapid politicization of intelligence marked the new era of CIA oversight. In 1982, for example, the Democratic-controlled House Intelligence Committee released a staff report asserting that the Administration was cooking intelligence to gain support for its policy in Central America. According to the committee's own intelligence consultant, former deputy director of the CIA Adm. Bobby

Inman, the report was "filled with biases," and in fact had been prepared at the specific request of committee members with a partisan axe to grind. Furious that he had not been consulted, Inman resigned.

A clear breach of secrecy occurred in September 1984 with press reports of a CIA briefing of the Senate Intelligence Committee that revealed our knowledge of a top-secret Indian proposal to make a preemptive strike against Pakistan's nuclear facility. Realizing its security had been compromised, the Indian government launched an investigation. The probe broke up a French intelligence ring that

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