

The Danger Can't Be Ignored

The prospects for a comprehensive charter for the Central Intelligence Agency are dim. The intelligence committees in the Senate and the House seem to have taken the view that what the CIA needs is not more control but less. Last Wednesday the House Intelligence Committee declined to back its chairman in a move to push for a charter. The next day the Senate Intelligence Committee gave up on the charter for the year, proposing instead a shortened bill to give the CIA more scope.

The setback for the charter is in part the result of election-year politics. Some Republicans in Congress believe that a Republican Administration could propose a charter next year more to the agency's liking; some Democrats fear being accused of voting for a stringent bill.

The crises in Iran and Afghanistan are the CIA's best ally in the congressional struggle. The agency has been appealing to a vaguely based but strongly felt belief in Congress that the CIA has been fettered and that, if it hadn't been, the American position in the world would be better. There is no evidence for this belief, nor has the CIA offered any. It is true that the agency has been rocked and, some accounts say, demoralized by the series of events that began with the revelations several years ago of widespread illegal and questionable activities. The

low morale has continued under a series of directors whose guidance of the agency has been contested by its members. There are suggestions from serious observers that its current chief, Adm. Stansfield Turner, is contributing to its malaise.

Former CIA director William Colby argued—plausibly enough, we thought—that the agency would act more effectively and freely if it knew clearly what was permitted and what was prohibited. In any case, a charter would prevent its agents from the excesses they had fallen into in the past.

This is not to deny that a charter is difficult to write. Its authors have to give the CIA power to do the job without overdoing it. It was partly in drawing those fine lines that the attempt foundered.

One aspect of the short bill favored by the Senate is clearly sensible: The number of congressional committees to which the agency would have to report future actions would be cut from eight to two.

If Congress—which got no help, by the way, from an ambivalent Administration—is unable to write a charter this year, it will have to next year. The excesses of the past cannot be forgotten; the danger inherent in such secret power cannot be overlooked. It is not beyond the wit of Congress, in calmer times, to write a charter that promotes American security in ways consistent with American liberty. □