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## The Reluctant Dragon

Censorship is a many-headed dragon: once beheaded, it returns with scarcely diminished vigor to the fray. On 17 March President Kennedy ordered immediate termination of the long-standing policy of intercepting all but first-class mail from Iron-Curtain countries. But 4 days later Representative Francis E. Walter introduced a bill that would restore the policy and give it a legislative basis that it had not had in the past. His bill would create a "Comptroller of Foreign Propaganda" in the Customs Office of the Treasury Department and would require the registration of any foreigner who used our mails for distribution of "foreign propaganda" to register "as an agent of a foreign principal who is acting within the United States."

If this bill or its companion bill in the Senate were to become law, any book or magazine from any country, friendly or hostile, could be impounded unless its mailing clerks or other distributors were registered as agents of a foreign principal acting in the United States. For any printed matter may be regarded as propaganda: under the previous policy an issue of the London *Economist* and hosts of books from abroad were arbitrarily impounded. And what would prevent the "Comptroller" from deciding that scholarly and scientific articles and reprints are foreign propaganda?

The bill is wrong in principle: it would impose a censorship that is inconsistent with the practice of that liberal democracy upon which we base our society. It is symbolic of fear and manifests a lack of faith in freedom and in the good sense and good judgment of American citizens. Contrast the words of Jefferson's first inaugural address, "Error of Opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it," with Mr. Walter's fearful comment about what will happen if the President's action is allowed to stand, "Poison will be poured into the veins of our society without restriction and without notice or warning of its nature."

The bill is not only wrong in principle. It will also have deleterious effects on the scholarly and scientific appraisal of what goes on abroad. Our self-interest alone dictates that we encourage rather than impede the flow of information of all kinds about what goes on elsewhere in the world and especially about what is happening behind the Iron Curtain. Congress recognized the desirability of this when it decreed in the National Defense Education Act of 1958 that the National Science Foundation step up its efforts to make scientific information available to American scientists. The Walter bill is no empty threat to this activity that the NSF now carries on through its Science Information Service: under the previous policy, *Mathematical Reviews* received no Soviet journals for one 2-year period.

What are the chances for the bill? As of now the bill has been carried over "without prejudice" to the Consent Calendar of the House. If no objections are made to it on the next "consent" day, 5 June, it will pass the House without debate, without hearings, and without a vote. This is what happened to a similar bill introduced by Mr. Walter last year, but that bill died in the Senate. The current bill is not likely to have such easy sledding in the House, for it faces opposition from the Administration: administration supporters will not readily let it slide through unopposed.—G.DuS.