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Postal Censorship

Only a year ago, on 17 March 1961, President Kennedy brought to a stop the interception of mail deemed to be foreign political propaganda by the Post Office and the Bureau of Customs. The practice, which was of dubious legality [*Science* 133, 549 (24 Feb. 1961)], interfered with the free movement of printed matter, including much that by no stretch of the nonbureaucratic imagination could be classified as political propaganda. As a consequence of the lifting of restrictions, research scholars and scientists as well as other citizens have been able to find out, without hindrance, what the iron curtain countries are up to.

The fears of some that the removal of restrictions would open the floodgates to Communist propaganda have not been realized. Actually, the flow has dropped off: the number of printed pieces of mail received in New York from Communist countries, which averaged 1.3 million per month in 1960, has averaged only 865,000 since March 1961.

But those who lack confidence in the good sense and patriotism of our citizens are always ready to shield us from knowledge. In January the House of Representatives passed the massive Postage Revision Act of 1962 (H.R. 7927), designed to bring in enough revenue to reduce the annual postal deficit from a projected \$875 million to about \$350 million. This is a laudable aim, but, as happens all too often, a good bill carries a bad amendment. If this "Cunningham Amendment" is retained, disruption in the delivery of foreign mail could be much greater than at any time in the past, and even material of domestic origin could be declared nonmailable. The amendment would prohibit the Post Office from the "handling, transportation, or delivery of mail matter determined by the Attorney General to be Communist Political Propaganda financed or sponsored directly or indirectly by any communist controlled government." Political propaganda is defined in the Foreign Agents Registration Act as any communication which is "reasonably adapted to . . . influence a recipient with reference to the political or public interest, policies, or relations of a government of a foreign country or a foreign political party or with reference to the foreign policies of the United States." Under this definition surely Soviet newspapers and many scholarly and scientific journals would be barred from the mails. A recent study of 19,000 pages of Soviet scientific journals showed that although political propaganda constituted less than 1 percent of the total, it was scattered throughout. It could not be readily eliminated without eliminating the scientific content or delaying its publication. If the amendment should pass, such material could not be mailed within the United States from one scientist or library to another.

In the House, Representatives John V. Lindsay and William F. Ryan raised their voices against the amendment, which was carried by a vote of 127 to 2. There were no hearings in the House, but in the Senate, where the amended bill is in the hands of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, hearings are now being held, and the opposition will have a chance to speak out. Hearings on the amendment itself will be held within the next few weeks, at a time still to be set. The American Council on Education is among the groups that will testify against the amendment, and it will probably be joined by the Post Office, the State Department, the Department of Justice, and the U.S. Information Agency. Let us hope their testimony may be effective.—G.DuS.