PETITION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
89th CONGRESS

We, the undersigned, for the reasons set forth below, respectfully petition the House of Representatives to abolish the Committee on Un-American Activities.

The sole power conferred on the Committee is to investigate "un-American propaganda activities" and "subversive and un-American propaganda" in the United States. Its jurisdiction is thus limited to inquiring into ideas, opinions, speech and other forms of expression. Within this area, moreover, its powers are undefined, for no precise meaning has been, or can be, given to such vague terms as "un-American" or "subversive." We believe that the existence of a legislative committee with such authority is irreconcilable with a system of free expression in this country. The power of a legislative committee to summon witnesses, to interrogate them in public, to subject them to public exposure, and otherwise to mobilize the great force of governmental authority against the object of its investigation, constitutes an awesome exercise of official power. When such power is directed exclusively against the rights of Americans to free and open expression, or association for such purposes, it cannot be justified under any concept of democracy.

In its actual operation the Committee on Un-American Activities has wrought much harm. It has taken as its main function, as indeed is inevitable from its grant of power, the exposure and extermination of ideas, opinions and organizations which it conceives to be "un-American." Its methods have often been unfair. It has attempted to create in the legislative branch a permanent institution, consisting of staff, files, informants and similar machinery, designed to serve as a bureaucratic Big Brother to censor the opinions and associations of American citizens. The result of these activities has been to curtail discussion of controversial issues and to hinder the development of new ideas and new approaches to the troublesome questions which face us in a rapidly changing world.

The Committee on Un-American Activities serves no useful purpose. So far as the operations of the House of Representatives are concerned, the Committee considers only a handful of bills each year, and all these fall within the jurisdiction of some other committee. So far as the Committee purports to serve the function of safeguarding internal security, it is quite unnecessary. We have adequate laws, regulations, specialized personnel and procedures for that purpose. There are serious problems confronting us, but the human and natural resources in this country are surely adequate to the task. What is needed is an opportunity to permit our democratic institutions to function as they are meant to do, with new and unorthodox ideas welcomed but subject to full and free discussion. The maintenance of a legislative committee to restrict this process betrays an ultimate lack of faith in a democratic society.

Believing that there is no place in our system for such a Committee, we urge the House of Representatives to abolish the Committee by repeal of paragraph 18 of Rule XI.

We do not suggest the abandonment of all legislative machinery for investigation of matters pertaining to legislation necessary for assuring internal security, or to administration of existing laws. We believe that adequate authority for these purposes is already vested in other House committees, particularly the Committee on the Judiciary. Under subsection 'c' of paragraph 12 of Rule XI, the Judiciary Committee now has jurisdiction over "Bankruptcy, mutiny, espionage, and counterfeiting." Under this provision, and a similar one in the Senate Rules, the Judiciary Committees have traditionally dealt with matters of internal security. In the event members of the House feel that the authority of the Judiciary Committee should be clarified, however, this can readily be accomplished by amendment. In order to avoid perpetuation of the problems noted previously, such an amendment should make clear that the Judiciary Committee has power to investigate overt actions but not "propaganda" or other forms of expression, or association for those ends. We believe this objective could be achieved by amending subsection 'c' to read: "Bankruptcy and counterfeiting; mutiny, espionage, sabotage, insurrection and other overt actions relating to internal security."

There remains the question of disposing of the files of the Committee on Un-American Activities. These files are extensive, containing miscellaneous and often inaccurate data about millions of Americans. It may be assumed that, insofar as this material pertains to violation of law, it has been made available to the appropriate prosecuting authorities. The remainder is not of a character which should be maintained in a legislative file or furnished to the public. Self-respecting citizens of a democratic country cannot allow their representatives in government to keep dossiers on their beliefs, ideas, political views or associations. Such an enterprise is destructive of the sovereign rights of the individual and a perversion of the governmental process. We recommend that the files be transferred to the Archives, not to be open for official or public inspection for 50 years.

We therefore petition the House of Representatives (1) to repeal paragraph 18 of Rule XI, thereby abolishing the Committee on Un-American Activities; (2) to transfer its files to the Archives, under condition they be not open for official or public inspection for 50 years; and (3) if the House believes that the jurisdiction of the Committee on Judiciary requires clarification, to amend paragraph 12 of Rule XI to give that Committee power to investigate overt actions relating to internal security, but not matters of opinion, speech, association for such purposes, or other forms of expression.