

Mary McClory

Stage for CIA Probe
Is a Shrine to Mars

The place itself explains quite a lot. The House Select Committee on Intelligence — after what its new chairman Otis Pike of New York deems, with elegant understatement, "some slight delay" — was holding its first open hearing on the CIA in the Carl Vinson Room of the Rayburn Building. In the enormous, tasteless Carl Vinson Room, Mars is in the ascendancy. Over both doors leading to inner offices are wooden shields featuring a fan-shaped arrangement of five sabers.

On the walls are portraits of past chairmen of the House Armed Services Committee, not one of whom ever fleetingly considered beating swords into ploughshares, and all of whom enjoyed a comfortable, winking relationship with the agency they were supposedly overseeing.

IN THAT SETTING, with those men in control, it was easy for the CIA to get into its current scandal-a-day predicament. During the years of the likes of L. Mendel Rivers and F. Edward Hebert, small matters like secret wars and wholesale domestic spying were easily overlooked, or more likely, heartily applauded when confided behind closed doors.

Chairman Pike is planning to use, as a flashlight in the jungle, the budget of the CIA. It is a wonderfully simple and sensible suggestion, to follow the dollars, but the first witness, Elmer Staats, illustrated vividly that in this case, to seek is not necessarily to find.

The controller general of the General Accounting office, a bald and sober man of impeccable integrity and efficiency, explained rueful-

Point of View

ly that while he had the authority to find out where the CIA got its money and where it was spent, somehow he could never get hold of the ledgers.

Congress has passed laws which make it difficult for him, and the CIA has made it impossible. He was, for instance, authorized to look at the books on "overt activities" but somehow or other, "overt" was slid over into covert, and he was off limits.

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"WE REFERRED any apparently questionable payments to the CIA's comptroller's office for corrective action," he testified. The situation is familiar. In the Watergate affair, when the heat mounted, Richard Nixon ordered one of the conspirators to look into the conspiracy.

There was, Staats said, "a basic disagreement over our right of access to certain information. And the intelligence community generally requires special security clearances which are expensive to process and require at least six months or more to complete."

It was a Republican freshman, young James Johnson of Colorado, who first used the word "stonewall" to describe the process.

"Do you just take it for granted you don't have the authority to go into it?" he asked.

Staats sighed. "We make that effort. It is their decision to make."

"What kind of attempts do you make when they refuse to talk to you, if they flatly refuse?" Johnson asked in tones that the portraits would never have permitted in their day.

The committee is young, it was formed only two weeks ago, yet in its first hours, several personalities emerged.

THE AGENCY watchdog, is obviously Robert McClory, R-Ill., a fussy conservative, who has said from the first that the committee's function is to preserve the CIA.

He bared his teeth early on.

Rep. Ron Dellums, D-Calif., was asking about the CIA's vast secret financial empire. Staats has somehow slipped the borders once and poked into corners involving the sale of CIA subsidiary companies. He was hesitant to answer questions about what happened to the money from the sale.

McClory indignantly broke in to protest that "the witness has stated this is classified information."

Even the fact that Staats had performed the audit, it seemed, was classified.

McClory continued to sputter, and Robert Giaimo, D-Conn., who might

have been chairman of the committee when it was formed seven months ago, broke in.

"One of the problems going on for many years is that even before we have objections from the agencies themselves, there is a predisposition on the part of congressmen to invoke secrecy. That has been part of the problem over these many years."

PIKE DEALT briskly with the McClory problem. The witness was capable of handling himself, he observed. He ordered McClory to be quiet and Dellums proceeded in his search for the needle in the haystack.

Pike can control the committee all right. He's made it clear who is in charge. If he can convince the CIA that he has the right to know what it did with literally untold sums of taxpayers' money and if he can get them to answer questions that none of the portraits ever would have asked, the Carl Vinson Room will yet provide some enlightenment.