

REP. OTIS G. PIKE (D-N.Y.), a man who chooses his words carefully, sat down in the blue-curtained studio of the House radio-TV gallery and acknowledged he had been on the verge of accusing the Ford administration of a "cover-up."

Little more than an hour earlier, the administration finally delivered a stack of Central Intelligence Agency documents that, Pike said, had been repeatedly promised him as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

The turnover came about only after Pike had scheduled his press conference, and effectively stymied his plans for a televised burst of indignation.

The episode illustrated the frustrations, the shortcomings and even the shallowness of both congressional investigations of the CIA and the other intelligence agencies.

The Pike committee in the House and the Senate panel headed by Frank Church (D-Idaho) each has its own problems, but they share other headaches. As Church once warned Pike, who was getting off to a later start, the administration always promises cooperation, but its actions are always those of delay and obstruction.

Both investigations are supposed to be in their waning days, well on the way to completion. In fact, they have barely scratched the surface.

The Church committee, created last January, has a bureaucracy of more than 120 people. It was originally supposed to finish its work Sept. 1. At that point, however, it had not completed a single report on any issue or agency, or held even one public hearing.

Preoccupied by its closed-door investigation of CIA involvement in foreign assassination plots, the Senate committee won permission to stay in business until March. Finally, four weeks ago, it kicked off a sporadic series of public hearings in the chandelied elegance of the old Senate caucus room.

The hearings so far have been exasperating, tedious and inadequate. The evidence is always heavily censored. Questions that beg to be answered often go unasked. Each witness is sworn to tell "the whole truth," but he is rarely asked to supply it.

The Senate inquiries have resulted in hurried glimpses into such matters as CIA poisons, FBI burglaries and IRS harassment — good enough for a headline but little more. None of these issues was explored in depth.

Administration officials clearly

Spy Probers Dig, But Not Deeply

By George Lardner Jr.

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have a vested interest in pooh-poohing the revelations that are made, but they seem justified in asserting that no great detective work has been required for the Senate disclosures thus far.

"The CIA came across the toxins and investigated what happened," one official said. "We gave them that. They started going into mail openings, too, but the mail openings were disclosed in the Rockefeller report. And a lot of the IRS stuff came out in the Watergate scandal. They haven't evidenced any great investigative ability that I can see."

THIS OFFICIAL, and others, regard the Pike committee's programs as far more substantive.

The Pike committee began public hearings back in August with a look at the intelligence community's budget-making, but what was disclosed was extremely limited. Then, last month, the House members started digging into the "results" of the billions of dollars paid out each year, focusing on the intelligence failures to foresee the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the 1974 coup in Cyprus, the 1968 Communist Tet offensive, the 1974 revolution in Portugal.

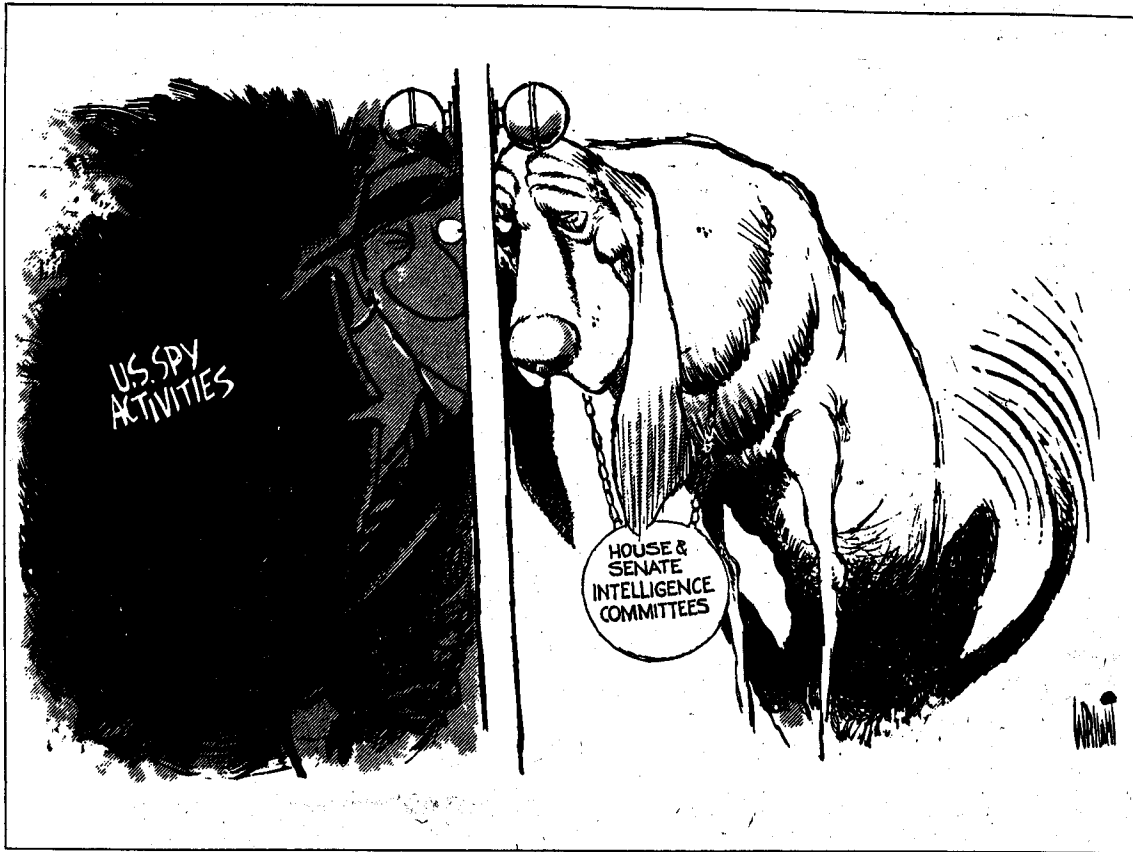
That the Pike committee could undertake any hearings at all was somewhat remarkable.

It was tied up for months in a dispute between its first chairman and its outspoken Democratic majority. The committee had only a skeleton staff in July when Pike became chairman. According to staff director Searle Field, it still has only about 30 people — less than one for every four on the Senate committee.

A leaner investigation can no doubt be tougher and more effective. But the House hearings have been little more than appetizers. They state the issues, but then leave them hanging.

Were the estimates of Communist troop strength in South Vietnam deliberately rigged to deceive the American public? Was the report from a "new and untested" source stating there would be no coup in Cyprus given widespread currency because that was what Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wanted to hear? Has Kissinger's own penchant for secrecy deprived U.S. intelligence experts of information they needed to know?

The questions are intriguing, but they have yet to be resolved. Only one witness was called to testify about the numbers game in South Vietnam. The man he blasted for condoning it — former White House aide Walt Rostow, Gen. William Westmoreland, former Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and



Wright in the Miami News

Defense Intelligence Agency chief Daniel Graham among others — have yet to be heard from.

Much of the fault, as Pike has observed, lies with the Administration's determined reluctance to supply needed documents. The White House is clearly much more comfortable dealing with Church and with John Tower (R-Tex.), the Senate committee's ranking GOP member. Pike is more unpredictable. The White House, according to one presidential aide, regards him as "indecipherable."

Partly as a result, there seems to be much more of a stir over every classified stack of papers the House committee demands. Documents are still being held back by Kissinger, who also won't let Pike question certain department officials.

It was, therefore, something of a surprise to hear Pike report the other day that the hearings on the quality of American spy work were virtually at an end. As he announced the commit-

tee's next task, he took no notice of any shortcomings, but simply said, "I think we've got a pretty good handle" on the intelligence costs and results.

Senate committee staffers have voiced pride in the Church panel's work. Despite the censorship imposed by the executive, one high-ranking investigator insists, "We've been getting what we need to make the points we need to make."

IT IS, at best, a limited view of what Congressional hearings should strive to achieve.

In the view of Sen. Howard H. Baker (R-Tenn.), the only member of the Senate panel who also served on the Watergate committee, "much too much" is regularly excised from the records offered to the press and public.

Part of this problem, apparently, lies in the hurry-up atmosphere of bargaining sessions between committee staffers and administration officials over how much can be disclosed. The haggl-

ing over secret evidence of crimes and questionable practice is often not completed until late at night, a few hours before a given hearing.

"In a perfect world, you'd have all those problems worked out," one Senate committee defender concedes. "But in the real world, you resolve them at the last minute, under the gun of public hearings. We're clearly using the imminence of public hearings to tell them to put up or shut up."

What remains unclear is why they weren't forced to "put up or shut up" months ago.

The danger has been voiced by Sen. Baker, who has repeatedly complained about conducting even the assassination inquiry in secret sessions. He's worried about leaving a legacy like that of the Warren Commission. It may have reached the right answers, but how many people believe them? Secrecy corrupts. It can even corrupt the truth.