

## Son of Watergate

The circling and snarling about how the House Select Committee on Intelligence will handle classified information may sound like a straight replay of former President Nixon's bitter-end fights with Congress. Yet what in fact is at stake is a more highly evolved second-generation Watergate issue of a quite different kind. This controversy does not involve issues of executive privilege and criminality. Rather, the question is whether, in the wake of Watergate, Congress will at last actually begin to exercise its oversight functions with respect to the nation's most sensitive agencies.

The current controversy flared in the wake of declassification and publication by the House committee of information showing that the American intelligence community had badly misgauged the Arab-Israeli war in 1973. The Administration's stated reason for counter-attacking with a condemnatory press conference by C.I.A. Director Colby, a Presidential comment deploring the committee's action and a dressing-down of the committee by an Assistant Attorney General was the inclusion in the published material, over C.I.A. objection, of four sensitive words.

It is now fairly clear that those four words revealed very little about American intelligence methods and sources. The history of the relationship between the select committee and the Administration suggests a larger reason for the Administration's prodigious huff. Almost from the beginning of its work, the reconstituted committee under Representative Otis G. Pike of New York has been aggressive in its quest for information about the mission and budgets of intelligence agencies.

Much as the C.I.A. would like to narrow the current issue to one of finding appropriate methods for declassification, the Administration's real concern seems to be to keep the House probers from delving as deeply as they should into the shadowland of intelligence activities.

Assistant Attorney General Rex E. Lee urged the committee to "return to the traditional approach. . . ." The trouble is that the traditional approach did not work. The House had to turn its Select Committee on Intelligence upside down and replace its former chairman, Representative Lucien N. Nedzi, because—in line with the traditional approach—he kept the C.I.A.'s embarrassing secrets from his Congressional colleagues. And it was the traditionally lax oversight procedures of Congress that allowed the Nixon Administration to misuse such agencies as the C.I.A., the F.B.I., the Secret Service and the Internal Revenue Service.

Under the old "oversight" rules, the executive branch decided not only which people in Congress it would confide in, but also what information would be kept secret and for how long. That process failed the people and dishonored the Congress. Devising a new relationship presents many difficult problems for both the Administration and Congress, in view of the country's clear need for effective and responsible intelligence agencies. But the last way to solve those problems is to deny the essentiality of genuine Congressional oversight, in place of the near-void that has existed up to now.