

The Nixon Administration has conspicuously failed in its responsibility to tell the truth to the public about the military spying on civilian officials in 1971-72. Secretary of State Kissinger plays down his own role in this murky affair. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger deprecates its importance. The White House refuses to comment.

In these circumstances, Congress has a clear duty to conduct a thorough and searching public investigation. But in this matter Congress, too, is falling down in its responsibilities. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is apathetic. Senator Stennis, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has done nothing beyond holding a private meeting with the chief offender, Admiral Thomas L. Moorer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Admiral Moorer has admitted receiving confidential documents from Henry A. Kissinger's White House office that were surreptitiously obtained by two military officers assigned as liaison between Mr. Kissinger and the Joint Chiefs. When the White House "plumbers" investigated this high-level spying and discovered the source of the leakage, the two military men—a rear admiral and his clerk—were transferred but not otherwise disciplined.

Everyone involved is now eager to minimize this episode. But the very intensity of the denials suggests that there is a good deal more involved than has yet been revealed. Although Secretary Schlesinger insists "the thing has been blown out of all context," Egil Krogh, recently convicted former chief of the plumbers, asserted last weekend that if Mr. Schlesinger had read the "foot-thick" report prepared for the President about the extent of the Pentagon's spying effort, he would not dismiss the matter so casually.

In any bureaucracy, information is power. But what is

at stake here is something more important than a bureaucratic power struggle between Mr. Kissinger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for control of policy. What is involved are the critical principles of civilian supremacy over the military and of executive branch responsiveness of the public acting through its elected Congress. The power of the military can be contained only if the President and his chief civilian subordinates maintain effective control at all times.

It is up to Congress on behalf of the people to see that such control is real and is diligently exercised. But the relevant committees of Congress dealing with the military, the intelligence community and foreign affairs are too easily bemused by the civilian and military officials whose official conduct they are supposed to be monitoring. Instead of asking the necessary rude questions and transacting the public's business in public, the members of these committees are too easily satisfied by confidential briefings in which the policymakers may titillate them with secret information.

Even worse, members allow their chairmen to usurp authority that belongs to the committees as a whole. For example, why does Admiral Moorer think that a cozy private chat with Senator Stennis will suffice to hush any complaints on Capitol Hill? Presumably, it is because the members of the Armed Services Committee and of the rest of Congress have shown in practice that they are willing to abdicate their supervisory responsibilities to Senator Stennis. This practice of confiding in a few favored, reliable committee chairmen is what enabled the Administration to hoodwink Congress and the country about the bombing of Cambodia for four years.

When will Congress learn that this irresponsible secrecy is undercutting public confidence in government? When will Congress insist that civilian and military officials explain their actions in public and demonstrate that basic trust in the people on which this Republic is founded?