

The Work of the Watergate Committee

Cheap-shot artists are now taking after the Senate Watergate Committee. For it is child's play to show that, when it comes to investigation, Sam Ervin and his fellow senators are more like Dr. Watson than Sherlock Holmes.

But in fact the performance of the Ervin committee has far exceeded the normal congressional standard, not to mention advance expectations. The case for an early end to the hearings is that the committee has already done most of its basic work.

The basic function of the committee was in education. The task was to make the country aware through televised public hearings that Watergate represented not just unsubstantiated newspaper speculations, but a set of deadly attitudes and pernicious acts on the part of high officials.

As I argued previously in this space, nobody else—not even the Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox—could have commanded such wide attention. The evidence is that the committee succeeded brilliantly.

For one thing the polls now show that virtually everybody in the country—some 97 per cent—knows about Watergate. There has been a national alert to the danger of many of the tactics employed by the Nixon administration and previous administrations. There has even been a shift in national attitudes on salient issues and events.

Consider, for example, the public attitude toward the Kent State shootings of 1970. According to the Harris Poll, a slim majority felt the shootings were necessary and justified back in 1970. Now, by a 55-31 majority, the country believes the shootings were "unjustified."

Consider next the matter of spying on the private lives of political opponents. The Nixon administration did that as a matter of course, and in his testimony a former top White House aide, John Ehrlichman, defended it as a public service. But when asked about that practice in the Harris Poll, the American people rejected it by an 83-8 majority.

Apart from brushing up the country's sense of fairness, the committee and its staff actually developed vital new information. The existence of the tapes of President Nixon's conversations and phone calls was unknown until the committee staff pulled it out of a reluctant witness. Now the tapes lie at the heart of several major trials, not to mention the possible impeachment of the President.

The committee also unearthed the so-called Colson memo—a memorandum from former White House special

counsel Charles Colson on the anti-trust case against the International Telephone Telegraph Corp. Thanks to that memo, perjury charges are apt to be brought against two former attorneys general—John Mitchell and Richard Kleindienst—and some leading officials of the company.

Lastly, it was the committee which also discovered the "enemies list" compiled within the administration. As much as anything else, the existence of those lists, and the marginal notes, demonstrated the harsh, vindictive character of the men the President chose to put around him.

To be sure, the committee has been less than perfect. Many of the senators seem to have been performing on the committee more than serving. The staff has seemed unsophisticated in political matters, and over its head in constitutional debate. There have been far too many leaks from both the staff and the senators.

But by the standards of past senate committees, that indictment represents

the merest bagatelle. By and large the Ervin committee has been remarkable for the seriousness of its inquiry, and the fairness of its proceedings. If the public is now impatient with the committee, it is because it has done its work too well. The points it needed to make about the nature of Watergate and the character of the administration have been abundantly established. What is required now is not to spread out more detail, but to find a way of dealing with the horrendous abuses already revealed.

In this matter the committee still has a role to play. It is no longer the role of fingering bad guys. That can be safely left to the special prosecutor, Mr. Cox. What needs to be done now is to make serious recommendations for reform and punishment. The right vehicle for those recommendations is the committee report, and that report will be crucial when it comes to the central issue posed by Watergate—the issue of the impeachment of the President.

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