

Trial Follows Script

Watergate's Non Sequiturs

By Don Bacon

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WASHINGTON — The Watergate trial illustrates fairly clearly why so many Americans are fed up with politics and politicians.

This political disillusionment begins at the White House and percolates all the way down to the county courthouse. Increasingly the public has come to look upon politics as dirty business, but what's worse, most seem to believe that low behavior by political practitioners is inevitable and that nothing is to be done about it.

Small Fry

The Watergate defendants, including the five sad characters who have pleaded guilty to charges of burglary and illegal wiretapping of the Democratic National Offices, are all small fry who have chosen to put their own heads on the block in order to protect some bigger fish.

That is what most Americans believe — no matter what does or does not emerge from the testimony at the trial. The masterminds behind this rotten affair — whether they be with the Committee to Re-elect President Nixon or with the White House itself — may never be named in the testimony, and almost certainly

none will ever be indicted. But maybe that is not so important.

Political Code

The political code by which these individuals have so far been shielded reveals more than any grand jury indictment. Those still in government and politics who today may be congratulating themselves on their cleverness in fooling the court had best take another look.

They have not fooled the public. The trial of the Watergate Seven is unfolding

about the way the public expected. Did anyone really think high White House or party officials would be tied in? Did anyone really think serious effort would be made to determine how or why at least \$114,000 of Nixon's campaign money was funneled to a dirty tricks squad?

"I will do anything to protect this country," said Frank Sturgis, one of the guilty - pleading minor defendants, as he attempted to

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explain to Judge John Sirica why he participated in the Democratic headquarters break-in last June.

Sturgis's non sequitur seemed to baffle Judge Sirica as much as it did the spectators. But it was no worse than some of the other comic answers given by the defendants when confronted with serious questioning by the judge or, less frequently, by the chief prosecutor, Earl Silbert of the Justice Department.

"I want you to start from the beginning and tell me how you got into the conspiracy," the judge told Eugenio Martinez, another defendant seeking to plead guilty to the indictment. "I don't care who (your answers) might help or hurt . . . don't pull

any punches."

Martinez drew a blank. His memory failed. "I want to forget all the things, I don't want to remember any more."

That is the way it has gone. G. Gordon Liddy, the dashing, mustachioed, one-time counsel of President Nixon's campaign finance committee, naps at the defense table, apparently unconcerned that the jury may find him guilty. The other remaining defendant, James McCord Jr., former security chief at the Nixon Re-election Committee, drums his fingers aimlessly on the table and stares at the jury.

The New York Times, Washington Post and other publications have reported that the Watergate defendants were under great pressure to plead guilty — thus thwarting a public trial and assuring that hidden facts would remain hidden.

Judge Sirica, a no-nonsense man on the bench, is not easily intimidated. He interrogated the guilty pleaders for more than an hour, trying to crack their shell. "No," they replied in unison, when he asked if anyone had induced them with money or promises of "executive clemency" or commutation of sentence. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't believe you."

Nearly 30 years ago, John Sirica pursued a controversial investigation and refused to bend under intense political pressure. He is still tough, and as the Watergate trial continues to unfold, may yet venture where others fear to tread.