

Terrence O'Flaherty



The National Catharsis, Part I

"THE WATERGATE FAMILY" opened yesterday with an unusually lively premiere episode subtitled "Let The Chips Fall Where They May" which introduced members of the regular cast and served to whet the appetite of viewers for the long run which this series is guaranteed to have. It is the only show of the season which is not dependent upon the Nielsen Ratings for its success.



Senator Howard Baker

Several things set this program apart from the usual courtroom-style dramas seen on television. On "Perry Mason" the witnesses ALWAYS remember what happened on the night of January 17. The witnesses on yesterday's show couldn't. Most of us common folk who can't recall where we were last week sympathize with their predicament.

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THE PARTICIPANTS on the committee were colorful enough to have come from Central Casting: Senator Sam Ervin, the very picture of a Southern politician; Senator Dan Inouye, Japanese-American from Hawaii; Senator Joseph Montoya, the persistent New Mexican; Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut whose preamble twice referred to "the gut question" but I forget what it was; Senator Edward Gurney, the boyish Floridian; and Senator Herman Talmadge of Georgia who delivered the lovely line, "I want the full truth and let the chips fall where they may."

Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee was the only one who seemed to know where the television camera was. This was helpful during his opening remarks which assured us that the very fact that America is airing "this national catharsis" is a demonstration of the strength of the democratic system. This was a close call.

SENATOR BAKER also allowed as how "the press has done us a billion dollars worth of staff work in this case" — a truth which committee members proved time and again by basing their questions on newspaper accounts — some of which appeared to be less than accurate.

The opening scenes with witness Robert Odle Jr. could almost have been scripted by a master of courtroom drama. It might be called the open-and-shut-trap technique. The chairman had thanked Odle and he was on the point of departure. He had spoken his farewell line (and it was a good one): "I am glad to have been of assistance, but if I said I am happy to be here I would be guilty of perjury." Then suddenly he was called back and the questioning continued at greater pressure than before.



Robert Odle

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AT THE OUTSET, each of the Senators made a short speech assuring us that he is for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth while the witnesses handed the Bible. Thus we are assured of an aura of veracity — until the viewer recalls that John Mitchell did the same thing before a grand jury which now charges him with six counts of lying under oath.

The usual distractions which seem inevitable in telecasts of this sort were evident yesterday — the unidentified characters in the background, scratching themselves and yawning but otherwise showing no evidence of the right to be present. What are all those people DOING there?

The Series continues "live" today at 7 a.m. on all network TV channels and KQED-FM radio with delayed telecast on KQED at 8 p.m.