

Watergate Pressures

The Senate's Watergate committee is currently under pressure from various directions.

Senator Edward J. Gurney, Republican of Florida, a member of the committee, has formally put forward a proposal which would radically alter the course of the committee's investigation. Mr. Gurney complains that the panel has heard only "minor witnesses" who have "shed little real light on the involvement of the President."

The Gurney proposal is that the committee immediately call seven of Mr. Nixon's ranking advisers, including former Attorney General John Mitchell and the top White House aides who have resigned or been fired as a result of these scandals. This idea had earlier been broached by another committee member—Senator Talmadge, Democrat of Georgia—and endorsed by Vice President Agnew.

The ostensible purpose is to clear the air concerning Mr. Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandals because the Ervin committee hearings are interfering with "the conduct of the Presidency." The result, however, would be to delay and perhaps even sabotage an effective inquiry.

Up to now, the committee has been following an orderly procedure of establishing a firm factual basis concerning the actual break-in at Watergate and certain related events. Only if that factual foundation is properly laid can the committee engage in a comprehensive and productive examination of the more significant figures in this complicated story.

The danger in requiring these figures to testify prematurely is that they might offer either *pro forma* denials or elaborate, self-serving explanations which the committee would not be adequately prepared to explore thoroughly. Such performances would constitute a charade, not an investigation.

Meanwhile, Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox has reportedly discussed the possibility of suspending or terminating the Ervin committee's inquiry. Mr. Cox has denied making such a request, and there seems no possibility that the committee would entertain it. The Senate's right to conduct an inquiry is clear.

There is undoubtedly the risk that testimony by some witnesses before the Ervin committee may make it difficult for the Government to prosecute those same individuals successfully. If the committee grants immunity to an individual, the Government can only successfully prosecute him if it acts on the basis of independent evidence other than his testimony.

But the larger public interest lies in obtaining the greatest possible explication of all the facts in the interrelated Watergate scandals and not in the conviction of particular wrongdoers. As Senator Ervin has said, "It is much more important for the American people to find out the truth about the Watergate case than sending one or two people to jail."

Senator Ervin is an experienced jurist with a record of concern for individual rights. He and Senator Baker of Tennessee, the ranking minority member, and their colleagues as well as Samuel Dash, the committee counsel, have conducted an investigatory hearing which thus far has been a model of fairness. They merit public support in ignoring diverse pressures and persevering in their essential work.