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The Senate Hearings: 'Let Them Drone On'

Many who support President Nixon and many who hate his guts are agreed on one thing: The Senate's Watergate hearings are dragging too slowly. They want to get quickly to the heavy issue: Is Richard Nixon a criminal or isn't he?

Isn't that what the hearings are all about?

If the thing you're watching on television these days is just a drama, then you're bound to be impatient for the denouement. Is the main character a hero, or is he a villain? No matter which you wish him to be, you do want to know.

But some people who understand very well that far more than a TV drama is unfolding before us also want to skip to the back of the book. Sen Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.), a member of the Ervin committee, wants to flip right through these early, boring pages. So, too, does columnist Joseph Alsop, who says the committee should "immediately address itself to one subject and to one subject only—the truth or falsehood of the charge that President Nixon was a knowing participant in the Watergate crimes."

Can it be that these sophisticated men want to peek at the end just to see how it ends? Or do they understand that to peek too soon is to determine—or at least influence—the end?

Get the biggies—H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, John Mitchell—on the stand now, and it's a fair guess that they'll tell such a tight, consistent story—a story of presidential innocence—that it will be bound to influence any subsequent testimony by any of their subordinates.

The hearings would, in effect, be over. There is the chance that one of the biggies, or perhaps John Dean, would break ranks to cop a personal plea, but that's taking more of a chance than is necessary.

The Ervin committee is doing it the other, boring way. Talk to the subordinates first. They don't know or trust each other well enough to tell a completely consistent story, and the bits and pieces of their testimony will help to provide a context in which the explanations of the higher-ups can be more accurately judged.

If the top dogs talk first, and if their story has a fairly plausible ring to it, there will be little pressure on their subordinates to tell a different story, no matter what the facts may be. If Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Dean had been put on the stand at the beginning, the hearings would be over, and all three would still be at their old jobs.

Apply the heat from the bottom,

however, and the pressure builds in a very different way. The big boys have to change their generalized not-under-oath (and therefore flexible) explanations as new revelations come from below. The process is far more likely to produce truth, both of fact and of context, than the rush to the back of the book.

Some of those at the top already are changing their explanations—and attitudes—as a direct result of pressure from the bottom.

We learn of investigations that weren't really investigations, of "plumbers" and rampant national secu-

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rity—and more than anything else, we learn of the mind set of the people at the top, things that we never would have learned if the questions had first been put to the people at the top.

The more we learn, the more it seems that Alsop's all-crucial question (whether Richard Nixon was a "knowing participant" in Watergate) becomes almost an irrelevancy, at least so far as the Senate hearings are concerned. What's the point of talking about Mr. Nixon's guilt or innocence? Guilt or innocence of what? Burglary? Wiretapping? Lying?

To listen to some of those who want to skip to the end of the book, you'd think the most important thing is to get the right people convicted and jailed. And that most certainly should happen with those guilty of specific crimes, including those who knowingly made illegal campaign contributions.

But what seems to me to be the essence of Watergate is that America was under attack, from the inside, and perhaps by people who didn't really know that they were working to destroy the country and what it stands for.

If President Nixon is guilty of having let that happen, of encouraging or participating in it, then what earthly difference can it make whether he had specific knowledge of some "third-rate burglary"?

Let the hearings drone on. Let us find out just how much trouble we're in. And if one result is that a few people who ought to go to jail go free instead, so what?