

The Talk-Show Circuit

By Tom Wicker

GREENSBORO, N. C.—One thing the traveler on the talk-show circuit quickly learns these days is that there still is plenty of interest—even a consuming interest—in the Watergate story. Some people may be calling the networks to complain that Sam Ervin vs. Ed Gurney is not as thrilling on the tube as “John’s Other Wife” or as funny as “The Dating Game”; but out there in radio-and-television land, the housewives and the night workers and anyone else with a telephone handy seem to be burning with curiosity about one central point: Did the President know?

“Man, I gotta believe he had to,” a caller tells Gerry Williams of Boston’s WBZ. “No way a smart guy like Nixon never knew a thing.”

On the other hand, an irate early morning voice demands of a visitor to “Morning With Stanley” on Nashville’s WLAC-TV, did The New York Times and The Washington Post ever investigate vote-stealing in 1960 in Illinois and Texas the way they now pursue the Watergate issue? Not a chance, says his tone of voice before an answer can be given.

No matter how the agile young men and women who moderate these shows try to steer the conversation elsewhere, the questions always come back to Watergate—at least when the studio visitor is a newspaper man or a politician or someone with a Washington connection. “You really think there’s a chance he’ll be impeached?” asks a hopeful young Atlantan during a taping of “Countdown From Eleven” at WQXI-TV. He gets a fast professional hedge in response.

Opinion, as measured by the comments of talk-show callers, does not seem to be solid, although one horseback impression is that it is tilted somewhat against Mr. Nixon. A regional pattern is evident, too—Mr. Williams’ Boston callers seemed more hostile to the President than the Southern accents of Nashville or Atlanta.

Some of the connections being made are a little far-fetched. A Boston voice expressed the excited conviction that the discovery of the Watergate culprits explained at last the mystery of President Kennedy’s assassination. To a guest on Teddy Bart’s afternoon talk-show on Nashville’s WSM—heard in nine states—one caller put up a stiff argument that Senator Joe McCarthy had been more solicitous of the rights of witnesses than is the Ervin committee.

A constant on several talk shows in recent days was the Pentagon papers ploy—in what way, callers asked with

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an edge of triumph in their voices, was it different for a burglar to “steal documents” on the one hand, or to tap a phone on the other. Patient explanations that no burglary and no legally defined theft were involved in the Pentagon papers case didn’t seem to make much impression.

“Just person’ly,” says a woman caller to “Morning With Stanley,” “if you ask me, if The New York Times and The Washington Post was to burn right to the ground, I think this old world would be a lot better off.” This is an assertion not easily answered at 7:15 A.M., after a long night among boon companions at the Ritz Cafe in Nashville.

What can be said to the belligerent questioner who wants to know who elected the American press to decide which Government secrets can be published and which can’t. And how can an earnest caller to the Sherrye Henry Show on WOR in New York be convinced in the time available that Watergate is not an editorial policy of the Eastern elitist press but a police-state tactic just barely nipped in the unlvely bud?

One thing seems sure; The American people are an opinionated breed, and not hesitant to tell the airwaves what they think. This traveler on the talk-show circuit was heavily zinged by an articulate woman calling in to the Teddy Bart Show. She did not hesitate to label me a hypocrite for defending pupil busing while sending my children to private schools. And with considerable authority she delivered a quiet clincher—my response, she said, certainly sounded “comfortable” for me.

But if there is a hard assertiveness and considerable intelligence at work in the thousands of calls going in nightly—or at any hour—to the talk shows, it seems to at least one recipient that there is something else, too, something more than a little disquieting. There is a kind of loneliness in these calls, in these disembodied voices crackling through from distant phones; and a listener in the glassy studios can sense in their words a note of desperation, an urge to communicate, to be in touch, to be heard, to register some statement amid the babble of voices, against the endless quiet of time.

“I just want to ask you one thing,” said a Nashville man. “Only I guess it’s not a question. I guess I just want to say something.” And he did, and more power to him.