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Hearing Howard Hunt

When the Ervin committee resumes its public Watergate hearings on Monday, it will be worth watching whether the individual members and their staff counsels have coordinated and sharpened their questions so as to limit the repetition and confusion that often marked the first phase of the hearings. And the opening witness, convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr., will provide the acid test for any reform of the committee's approach.

Few witnesses before the Ervin panel participated directly in as many events in which the committee has taken an interest as did Hunt. He was in the "plumbers" unit, set up as an extra-curricular, perhaps extra-legal, White House investigative arm. He helped plan and supervise the break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. He performed a variety of questionable tasks for former White House special counsel Charles Colson, ranging from clandestine interviewing

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of persons about Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) to donning a red wig to question ITT lobbyist Dita Beard on the authenticity of her memo that caused a scandal.

Hunt also arranged for and received equipment and other assistance from the CIA which may have involved that agency, wittingly or unwittingly, in prohibited domestic operations. He was in on the planning and execution of espionage, sabotage and bugging operations involving not only the Democratic national headquarters, but also of Muskie and McGovern offices and the Democratic convention in Miami. He participated in the initial attempts to cover up the Watergate affair in the first days after the June 17 arrests. He received for himself and apparently redistributed funds allegedly aimed at buying the silence of those indicted. He has been alleged to have sought assurances from Colson that he would receive clemency and, according to former White House counsel John Dean, he sought a large amount of money in March 1973, just prior to sentencing, by threatening to disclose his past activities with the "plumbers."

In short, just by telling the details of what he has done that falls within the committee's interests Hunt could go on for days. Beyond that, as an individual Hunt is a ready and articulate talker, eager to justify his acts ideologically if it suits his mood and the opportunity presents itself. A former CIA operative for 20 years and a public relations man the past three, he knows how to handle questions and shape answers to meet his own rather than his interrogator's desires. In Hunt, therefore, the committee has a witness who, if not clearly directed, could lead them on a verbal chase through almost every aspect of the Watergate thicket.

It is thus all the more important that the committee keep track of the loose ends that Hunt is uniquely capable of clearing up. For example:

• For what use were materials in the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist sought? Former White House aide John Erlichman testified that the break-in was part of a plan to get everything possible on the character of a man who posed a national security threat. Hunt has told a Washington grand jury that the break-in was planned to get information to determine the "prosecutability" of Ellsberg—how he would appear to the public in a major political trial during an election year. A memo to Ehrlichman shortly before the break-in appears to characterize the episode as part of a "game plan" to destroy Ellsberg's public image through leaks of discovered material to the press—a plan to be designed by Colson. Hunt, therefore, should be asked what the real purpose was. Did he have access to other material, in this effort, particularly the wiretaps on White House aides and newsmen that were in effect between 1969 and 1971 and delivered to Ehrlichman in July 1971, the same time Hunt took up his duties with the "plumbers"? Did Hunt read any wiretap transcripts relating to Ellsberg at that time?

• How was authorization given for the break-ins and buggings planned by Hunt and his co-conspirator, G. Gordon Liddy? In January and February 1972, at the very time former Attorney General John Mitchell was supposed to be flatly turning down Liddy's intelligence plans, Hunt met or corresponded with at least two former CIA colleagues about their participation in bugging operations planned for the Democrats' Miami convention. Hunt also was working with Miami realtor and Watergate conspirator Bernard Barker in preparing for Miami. Who gave approval for that planning? How were Barker, Hunt and others paid during this time? Was there a specific go-ahead given? When and how?

• On the night of June 17, Hunt fled from the Watergate Hotel where he had been monitoring the break-in by walkie-talkie and crossed the street to the Howard Johnson motel after their arrests were made inside Democratic headquarters. He ordered the listening post in the motel shut down and arranged for a lawyer to represent those arrested. Did Hunt go back to his White House office that night to get $8,000 in cash for the lawyer? Who did he call that night or the next day? What did he and Liddy hope or expect in the way of protection — and from whom? Who was his White House contact after the break-in? What was he ordered to do in those first few days?

• Hunt's name was on a check found in the Watergate Hotel; almost immediately he was a suspect. On June 19, 1972, the safe in his White House office was drilled open and one week later material taken from it was given to the FBI. On June 28, John Dean gave then acting-FBI Director L. Patrick Gray III additional files from Hunt's safe — files which were termed "political dynamite"

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and not to be made part of the Watergate case. Gray later destroyed them. What materials were in Hunt's safe that have not turned up since? In a court affidavit he referred to a notebook and an address book. What did they contain? What happened to them?

• According to testimony, Hunt and his lawyer, William Bittman, received substantial funds between July 1972 and March 1973 from the re-election committee and the White House to pay lawyers fees and salaries for those arrested or later indicted. Who talked to Hunt about those payments? How much was actually received and how was it distributed? Both Dean and Ehrlichman testified that Hunt wished some assurances from Colson the first week in January 1973, prior to pleading guilty. Hunt should be asked what he sought from Colson, who presented his pleas and what answer he received. Around March 19, 1973, Dean said he had received word that Hunt would talk about the "plumbers" if he did not receive additional funds before sentencing on March 23. Did Hunt send such a message? A $75,000 payment was made to Bittman at about that time. When was that payment made and was it in response to the March 19 request to Dean?

Like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle, the Senate Watergate investigation contains some glaring holes. The public interest demands that the Ervin committee attempt to fill in the gaps before going on to other puzzles. Hunt is one witness whose carefully directed testimony could help enormously in that respect.