

Interrupted Hearings

The scheduled resumption today of televised hearings by the Senate Watergate committee on financing of the 1972 Presidential campaign has been abruptly called off by Chairman Ervin. The cancellation came reportedly at the request of Paul J. Curran, United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York. He apparently feared that the hearings might prejudice the impending trial of former Attorney General Mitchell and former Commerce Secretary Stans on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice.

Though earlier televised hearings before the Watergate committee do not appear to have impeded the subsequent trials of other Administration officials called as witnesses, a sound legal case can be made for postponement in this case. Special caution is justified by the imminence of the Mitchell-Stans trial—oft-postponed but now scheduled to begin Feb. 19—as well as the prominent positions the defendants formerly held in the Nixon Cabinet and in the Watergate scandals.

Such considerations of course do not justify a permanent blackout of the committee's unfinished business. The abrupt and rather ambiguous manner in which Senator Ervin announced the postponement is highly unsatisfactory. The chairman now owes the country a pledge that the postponement will be only that, and that the hearings will be resumed at the earliest practicable moment following the Mitchell-Stans trial. Since the committee's mandate is due to expire on Feb. 28, such assurances ought to be buttressed with the clearly stated intent to ask the Senate to extend the life of the committee if more time is needed.

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Without such pledges, the impression will inevitably be that the sudden blackout is really another form of whitewash or cover-up. The curtain would then have been brought down just before the scheduled appearance of Charles G. Rebozo, President Nixon's close friend and confidant. It would have precluded a public review of such politically explosive questions as the relationship, if any, between the White House and Howard R. Hughes, with his Nevada gambling interests, and with the milk industry, which profited signally from White House-approved price rises.

The protection of any defendant's right to a fair trial is of primary importance; but such essential concerns can be satisfied without permanently blocking the committee's vital task. The hearings have already performed an invaluable service—including discovery of the White House tapes. The committee has alerted the American people to the dangers of abuse of governmental power. Any deflection from its duty now would raise the question whether the United States Senate is sufficiently strong and courageous to complete a task that political considerations may seem to make hazardous.