

Watergate Hearings May Hurt Prosecution, Richardson Says

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CHICAGO, June 22 (AP) —Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson said today there is "a very serious possibility" that the Senate Watergate hearings will hamper further prosecution attempts.

Richardson told a news conference that news coverage of the hearings would influence a jury. "It would be impossible not to give a jury preconceptions about the case," he said.

He said he and the special Watergate prosecutor, Archibald Cox, are very concerned about the situation.

Much of the testimony given in public to the Senate committee is hearsay, Richardson said. "I'm certainly not satisfied that hearsay evidence has been eliminated or kept to a minimum," he said.

Richardson said he would prefer that the Senate hearings be suspended until after the Justice Department concludes its investigation of former top White House officials.

He said the hearings are not fair in that "they do not adhere to the safeguards that would apply in a criminal trial," citing cross-examination as an example.

Cox is proceeding with complete independence in his investigation, Richardson said, and is dealing with other Justice Department officials only on "a limited scale." Cox basically is using the investigative resources of the department.

Richardson said he is not relaying information about the investigation to President Nixon. "I've had very little information communicated to me (by Cox) and none by me to the White House," he said.

There may be a "legal bar" to getting President Nixon to testify before a

grand jury, Richardson said. "There are strong constitutional considerations that would point to the conclusion that he could not be" forced to testify, he said.

"Lawyers are used to thinking in terms of precedents but here we have no precedents," he added.

Richardson, in Chicago to attend the Midwestern and Eastern Regional United States Attorneys Conference, said he has ordered a Justice Department review of its bugging policies to make sure current bugging attempts are clearly justified.