

## Show Biz and Anguished Ritual

sense of assurance, a feeling that the country's temperature may yet return to normal.

As proof, the networks' switchboards no longer light up in protest against interrupted game shows and soap operas. Audiences have taken the advice of the *Miami Herald*, which recently admonished its readers: "This isn't the monotony you think it is. There is real excitement and drama in this continuing investigation. Lay that telephone down, pour yourself a cup of coffee and watch the real *Secret Storm*." Network officials believe that that storm is now attracting a steadily growing audience as the drama heightens, beginning with last week's appearance by Jeb



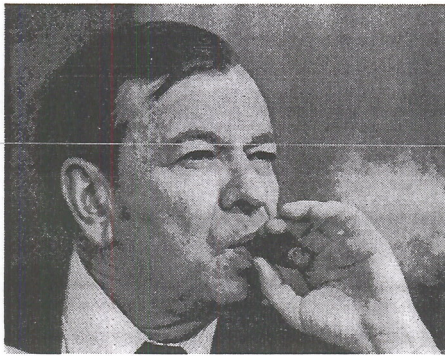
SENATOR HOWARD BAKER JR.

Stuart Magruder and continuing with this week's testimony by John Dean. Such campaign shibboleths as plumbers and Gemstone have gained overnight currency. The testimony is peppered with quasi-legalistic phrases, designed to show both earnestness and precision, but sounding vaguely Einsteinian: "At this point in time," "Did there then come a time when . . .?" And the characters are becoming a nationally familiar cast.

There has never been a grandfather figure quite like Senator Sam Ervin. His face is a cast in itself—the incongruously black eyebrows constantly reaching for the ceiling, the young eyes hiding in a face beyond age, the jowls and chins twitching with merriment or outrage. His apt biblical allusions, his dropped *g's* and regionalisms ("Yo' thinkin' . . . Yewnited States") are a happy antidote to Archie Bunkerisms.

Opposite this imposing septuagenarian, Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., 47, gives the impression of a leading man who has just come from musical comedy to his first dramatic role. Baker's style finds itself in the magisterial pause—possibly learned from his late father-in-law Senator Everett Dirksen—coupled with curious innocence ("What do you mean, 'a pretty good wireman?'"). His next show, Washing-

ton speculators have it, may be another drama: candidate for Vice President. No family is complete without its low-key philosopher. The part is flawlessly enacted by Herman Talmadge of Georgia, whose Mason-diction lines give credence to Mark Twain's observation: "Southerners have no use for an *r*." The supporting cast, a master stroke of ticket balancing, could populate a soap opera, western or detective series with equal skill. Among the audience favorites: Samuel Dash, a bright bald eagle in the great Jacob Javits tradition, who possesses a memory so phenomenal that he can correct the witness's recollection of dates and places; Lowell Weicker, the stolid patrician from Connecticut,



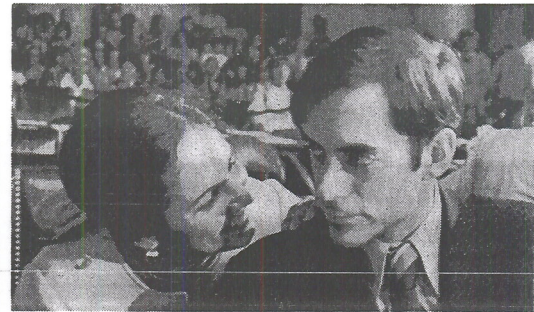
GEORGIA'S HERMAN TALMADGE

once a firm conservative supporter of the Administration, now one of its most eloquent detractors; and Daniel Inouye, the one-armed Hawaiian war hero whose mask of stoicism cannot quite hide the sense of humor that keeps peeking out from behind his horn-rimmed spectacles.

Still, these are characters, not conflict. It is the other side of the inquiry that commands most of the attention and provides the true drama. Some of the witnesses have introduced an aura of science fiction. The close-cropped, superpolite male ingenues, Herbert Porter and Hugh Sloan Jr., seemed open-faced children of the '50s miraculously transported to the present. Assassinations, riots, urban crises, political and social unrest—all seem to have passed over or under them, as if, perhaps, they had never owned television sets. Their appearances prompted Historian Irving Kristol to report the ironic wail of a conservative: "If only they had longer hair!" The more mature witnesses caused additional cries: Maurice Stans and Magruder were equally unruffled and well groomed. In some cases, the witnesses were accompanied by their attractive, equally open-faced wives, who patiently sat a row or two behind their husbands in the hearing room, testimony to the unity of the American family

in times of crisis. Senator Ervin's tribute to Gail Magruder was more than a courtly Southern gentleman's acknowledgment of beauty; it was a signal that forgiveness was in the air. The Senate Select Committee hearings are not, after all, Perry Mason redivivus, complete with dueling attorneys, surprise witnesses and sudden breakdowns. They are, instead, a series of civics lessons, a priceless course in government. With their strong undertow of show business, they are also a drama reaching back to the ancient rites of man.

In past societies, theater allowed audiences to define themselves through the



WITNESS HUGH SLOAN JR. WITH WIFE



COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN SAM ERVIN

acts of classic tragedy. In this century, films have sometimes assumed that function. Today, television seems to be rising to the role. Despite the unemotional statements of the witnesses, Watergate televised is anguished ritual and moral tragedy. It has its *longueurs*, and not all the questions are brief, cogent or acute; some of the Senators are intent on using their allotted time beyond real need. Still, each day brings new revelations and confirms old suspicions; each day creates a community of numb bystanders who will not be free until the last act is done.

It will be the print journalists' and historians' task to review and criticize that final act—and the play that preceded it. It is television's job to provide the stage. It has done that job admirably. As of now, the country can only be grateful, and the wisest political seer can do no more than mouth five magic words, the sage advice of TV announcers immemorial: Tune in tomorrow and see.

■ Stefan Kanfer