

Delicate Footing Seen In Watergate Hearings

By Lawrence Meyer

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The Senate select Watergate committee will resume its hearings today, but without the crisis atmosphere that compelled the attention of official Washington and a large segment of the American public for most of the summer.

The most significant difference is that the hearings no longer will be focused on the question that Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.), committee vice chairman, put to witnesses in the first phase: "What did the President know and when did he know it?"

Although one influential senator on the committee said in private conversation that President Nixon "is not out of the woods yet," time and the flow of events have turned the attention of the senators and the public to other questions.

The Watergate committee is now moving into more familiar political territory: campaign espionage and sabotage — collectively known during the 1972 campaign as "dirty tricks"—and campaign financing, including the question of whether some big contributions were made in exchange for political favors or were even extorted from politically vulnerable donors.

Although few diminish the importance of what the committee has left to do, virtually no one among its members or its staff believes that the testimony that the committee will hear between Monday and its target completion date of Nov. 1 will have the dramatic—some use the word "sensational"—impact of the testimony the committee heard in its first 37 days of hearings.

As a news event, the Watergate hearings may now be overshadowed by the legal problems confronting Vice President Agnew and the court battle between Special Watergate Prosecutor Archibald Cox and President Nixon over the White House tapes.

As a matter for congressional concern, the balance of the hearings apparently have been assigned a lower priority than the general problem of inflation and the specific problem of food prices, according to what congressmen and senators have reported after returning to Washington from August visits to their home districts and states.

All but the most jaded were jarred by the revelations on the first phase of the hearings about the break-in and bugging of the Democratic National Committee's Watergate headquarters with the planning and approval of high Nixon campaign officials, the use of campaign funds to obstruct justice by purchasing the silence of the Watergate defendants, the keeping of a White House "enemies list," and the automatic taping by President Nixon of conversations in the White House Oval Office, his Executive

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Office Building office and on several of his telephones.

The cast of characters in the first phase reached deep inside the White House, to the men closest to President Nixon. However, even with E. Howard Hunt, the committee in its final two phases will have only lieutenants and spear carriers for the most part, lesser lights and unknowns.

"The hearings aren't going to be what they were simply because we don't have the witnesses we had," said one committee staff member. "For the first time in the history of this nation, we opened up the bowels of the office of the Presidency. Here we had Haldeman and Ehrlichman, who kept senators waiting—sometimes for months—telling us how the presidency operated.

"The most significant thing about the whole Watergate episode is that the American people saw the inside of the office of the presidency," this staff member continued. "That's going to lead to more accountability.

"In the other two phases, you're talking about things that occurred throughout the political system. Some things that would shock other people wouldn't shock me," the staff member said.

"When you start probing into these things," said one aide to a Democratic senator, "a lot of the population at large might not be as sophisticated as a member of

TV Coverage Slated

On Hearing Today

The Senate select Watergate committee resumes its hearings today with testimony from E. Howard Hunt Jr., one of the convicted conspirators.

ABC-TV (Channel 7-WMAL) will carry the hearings live, beginning at 10 a.m. WETA-TV (Channel 26) will rebroadcast the hearings, starting at 8 p.m.

As a political problem, the hearings now are entering into a more delicate phase—political campaign tactics and financing—where the code of conduct is less well-defined, the law is fuzzy and today's Senate committee member could be tomorrow's subject of scrutiny.

the House of Senate. I think this is why campaign financing and 'dirty tricks' might be pursued a little less vigorously, because it does strike closer to home.

"I think that every member of the Senate is a little gun shy when you start talking about campaign financing and doing what you have to do to win an election. I don't know a single member here who has not had to be political," the aide said.

One committee source suggested that Republican senators have been pressuring their colleagues on the committee to cut the hearings short because they are receiving complaints from major contributors who have been contacted by the committee staff.

The committee reportedly compromised, after receiving a complaint from George Bush, chairman of the Republican National Committee, by agreeing to survey labor unions as well as major corporate contributors.

When it comes to dealing with "dirty tricks," the committee again is stepping into a politically delicate area.

One of the charges levied against the Committee for the Re-election of the President is that it tried to influence the outcome of the Democratic Presidential primaries through espionage and sabotage.

Gathering intelligence on the opposition and trying to influence the outcome of the opposing party's primary are time-honored practices in American politics, regardless of whether or not they correspond to the civics textbook notion of how the Democratic process works.

The limit, as one senatorial aide put it, is a matter of "decency," a vague standard that leaves wide latitude for debate and is difficult to translate into legislation. "It's politically acceptable to my mind to try to influence the other candidates' primary because you want to have the weakest candidate running against you," this aide said.

The committee members also are aware of the practical problems involved in running a campaign. "Anybody who has worked in a political campaign knows that the biggest problem is controlling the people who work in the campaign," the senatorial aide said. "That is the politician's biggest worry—what are my people doing?"

The end result is that the committee—for better or worse—is constrained from expressing or arousing too much moral indignation over practices that its own members themselves may

have employed to some degree in the past and may find necessary in the future.

Finally, Special Watergate Prosecutor Cox, in the minds of at least some committee members, has taken a firm grip on the task of investigating the Watergate affair and related scandals.

Cox already has obtained guilty pleas from two former Nixon campaign officials—Jeb Stuart Magruder and Frederick C. La Rue—and Donald H. Segretti, an undercover agent for the Nixon reelection committee, has agreed to plead guilty to a four-count indictment involving political sabotage against Democratic Presidential candidates.

In addition to pressing his effort to obtain presidential tapes of conversation with aides concerning the Watergate affair, Cox also is expected soon to return the first federal grand jury indictments since he assumed his position last May.

Although relations between Cox and the committee reportedly are somewhat distant, with the committee providing Cox more than he provides the committee, the two are cooperating.

The attitude generated in the committee by Cox' investigation is that the committee now can gracefully withdraw from the Watergate affair without appearing to have forsaken its task

and reasonably confident that Cox will do his job properly and thoroughly. "Cox is what it's all about," one committee staff member said. "He's the one who can send people to jail."



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Television crews rig lights in preparation for resumption of the hearings.