

Jury Reaches End of the Road

Watergate Panel Dismissed With Warm Praise

12-5-74

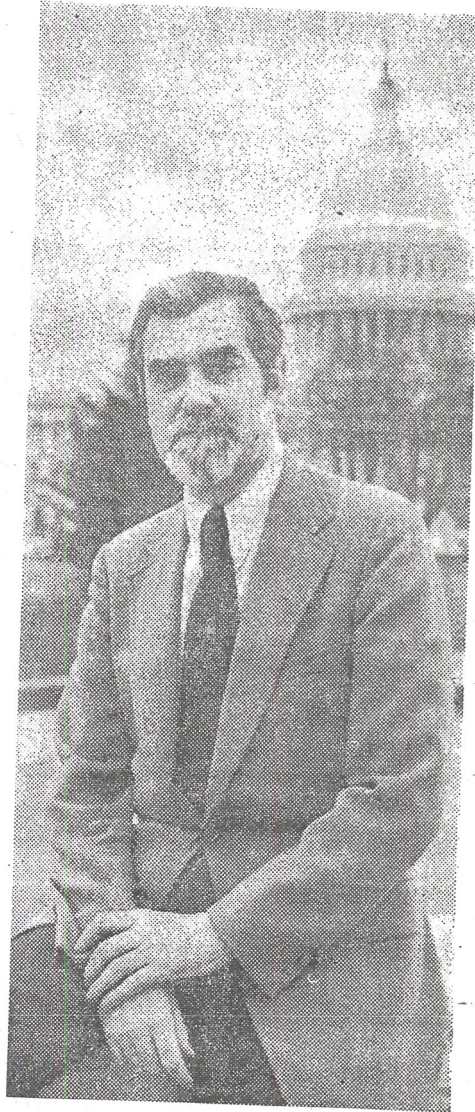
By Timothy S. Robinson
Washington Post Staff Writer

Grand jury Room No. 1, on the third floor of the federal courthouse here, is not necessarily built for comfort. Its chairs are padded and covered with green leather, but the 23 citizens chosen at random to occupy them for a normal term of 18 months are never expected to actually sit there for more than three or four hours at a time and seldom for more than two or three days a week.

The grand jury that was sitting in that room on June 23, 1972, had already been sitting off and on for 18 days. They had already distinguished themselves among federal prosecutors with whom they dealt as a "fantastic group," some of the federal attorneys recalled yesterday. The jurors probed, they pushed prosecutors who were presenting them evidence further than some of the prosecutors were accustomed. They didn't sit meekly and return indictments at a prosecutor's beck and call, but asked questions frequently.

That uniqueness of probing was what led one prosecutor to recommend the June 5, 1972, grand jury to then Principal Assistant U.S. Attorney Earl J. Silbert. When he and assistant U.S. Attorney Donald Campbell walked the 100 feet from Silbert's office to Grand Jury Room No. 1 that morning with a new case, the grand jurors heard the first evidence on a case that would take them through three special prosecutors as well as the original local prosecutors.

That day, police officers testified before them about a break-in at the Democratic national headquarters. Later in the same case, the jurors would hear evidence from top White House aides that would



United Press International

Jury foreman Vladimir Pregelj found the investigation "tedious."

bring down a President of the United States. The Watergate grand jury was enough convinced of the President's criminality to send the evidence they compiled by last March to the House Judiciary Committee that was holding an impeachment inquiry about President Richard M. Nixon.

Yesterday, the grand jurors were dismissed from duty after 30 months on the job. Five men they indicted in the Watergate cover-up are on trial now, a sixth is awaiting trial, the man against whom they gathered evidence for presentation to the House Judiciary Committee has quit, and there are two other sitting Watergate grand juries to carry on whatever probing remains to be done.

The grand jury returned the original seven Watergate indictments in the break-in itself, which resulted in five guilty pleas and two verdicts of guilty. Others who were targets of their investigation in to the Watergate cover-up—such as former White House Counsel John W. Dean III, former White House aides Fred LaRue and Jeb Stuart Magruder—led guilty before indictment based on evidence presented to the grand jury, and one other former top Nixon aide indicted in the coverup, Charles W. Colson, pleaded guilty to another White House-related crime.

The same jurors also heard evidence during their term that resulted in indictments of several police officers and gamblers in an alleged police-gambler bribery conspiracy that was the biggest such investigation locally in 22 years. That case, however, ended in shambles after 12 policemen or gamblers were acquitted by a trial jury after a 4½-month trial.

It all ended very quietly in U.S. District Chief Judge George L. Hart Jr.'s almost empty courtroom, with copious praise from the judge, handshakes from Watergate Special Prosecutor Henry S. Ruth and certificates of appreciation to the jurors for their service.

Judge Hart said it was the longest that a federal grand jury had ever heard evidence.

Judge Hart told the jurors that they had considered matters "that go to the very heart of our republic . . . Matters which involved the ability of this republic to exist and function as a republic."

He told them they had carried out their duties with "distinction and with honor," but before releasing them told them that they were still bound by their oath of secrecy concerning any matters discussed in the grand jury room.

That oath of secrecy "will follow you to your grave," Hart said, pointing out that any among them who violated it could be cited for contempt.

That means, quite simply, that members of the investigative body that heard the most evidence against Nixon administration officials may never talk about it with anyone.

What they may talk about, although cautiously is the burden that their term of duty placed on them and their families. Some also give, guardedly and in generalities, certain observations about the case and their role in it.

Vladimir Pregelji, the Library of Congress economist who was the foreman of the panel, said the investigation was "long, tedious, painstaking."

But he said the duty wasn't unduly burdensome to him and that he'd serve on a grand jury again if asked.

Pregelj and another juror, Julia L. White, said that they made many friends among the other grand jurors, persons whom they might have never met except for the random assignment to the grand jury system here.

Mrs. White, 39, mother of 11 children, said she planned to relax for a while, but added, "I'd have extended for another six months if they'd asked me."

"A lot of people say they don't like serving on juries or grand juries, but I like it. We are one large family . . . Everyone was on a first or last name basis. Nothing was segregated and there were no racial problems," Mrs. White said.

"It's something we're all proud of, even my kids," said Mrs. White, a former janitor at George Washington University.

"When my children grow up and hear about it or have to write theses on Watergate, they'll remember that their mother had taken a part in it . . . in history."