

Robert C. Maynard

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Getting at the Truth About the Watergate

The Watergate scandal has been predominantly a media event of several months running. Most of what we have learned has been a direct result of investigative reporting. While that is a tried and trusted method of gaining information, it is surely insufficient for the historic dimensions of this case.

Despite the industry displayed by a handful of reporters who stayed with the case, a media consumer can only

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feel baffled at the sense that we are all gnawing at fragments. We badly need for this whole matter of suitcases of "laundered" dollars and White House aides in rubber gloves skulking about in the night to be put into some coherent pattern. We are in a need of a comprehensive theory of action supported by sworn testimony in a forum that permits proper advocacy to take place.

Judge John Sirica was clearly disappointed that his courtroom did not turn out to be one of the places where truth could emerge untrammelled. He was not alone in welcoming the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities into the search for the truth. Many in America and especially in Washington believe the Watergate Committee might be the last and best chance the American people will have to gain an understanding of this bizarre event, to use President Nixon's terminology of last summer.

But events on television and in the newspaper over last weekend have set me to wondering if we are going to get a clear shot even from the Senate Committee.

The first stirrings of misgiving came with the evening news on Friday. By Monday's CBS Morning News, I was enveloped in deep doubt about this entire operation.

What caused my concern was that the image of Samuel Dash kept cropping up on my television screen on what I'd have thought would be most unlikely occasions.

Dash, who is chief counsel of the committee, made his first surprise appearance Friday on the steps of the U.S. District Court over on John Marshall Place, a ways from the Senate of-

fice complex if the issue of the separation of powers could be measured in city blocks.

James W. McCord Jr. had just dropped his bombshell about political pressure, perjury and an incomplete official cast of Watergate characters. Judge Sirica had indicated he would be pleased to know that he had given his full cooperation to the Senate Committee before McCord appeared again for sentencing.

McCord emerged from the courthouse and brushed aside the waves of microphones and headed off to plot his course. The next "talking head," as they say in television, was none other than that of Samuel Dash. He wasn't saying all that much, but then there wasn't much to say: Just that Sirica's action had been helpful.

No reasonably observant citizen could have doubted that the Senate effort had just received an enormous assist from the federal bench. That Dash needed to nip down Pennsylvania Avenue to tell the world it was helpful is all I question.

The reason I doubt the usefulness of such media practices is that Watergate has been left entirely too much to the media already. These stunning allegations, not one major one of which has as yet been successfully refuted, now need sober and thorough analysis.

The full extent of the scandal can only be elicited in a dispassionate forum endowed with subpoena power.

If Dash had held one press conference on the day he was to begin his work, introduced his staff, explained his understanding of his charter and bid the press farewell for three months, he could have been understood and forgiven.

After meeting Friday afternoon for three hours and again for the same length of time on Saturday with McCord, Dash emerged at yet another press conference on Sunday. He read a release stating that McCord had been cooperative and that they would meet some more.

But he didn't limit himself to the reading of the statement. He gave at least one television reporter, Leslie Stahl of CBS, a separate sitting interview in which he characterized his discussion with McCord:

"His spirit, I felt, was open, candid and honest and sincere. I—I've talked to many witnesses in quite a number of investigations for many years, and I would characterize his appearance, his—his discussion is not evasive, not—and not in any way in an effort to conceal but to fully give us information, realizing that he has many problems."

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It would have been my guess that it would take the most prescient of prosecutors more than one or two interviews with a witness in a case as complicated as this one before he was able to know that the witness was not behaving "in any way in an effort to conceal."

Dash, when apprised of the substance of this column, said it was important to emphasize that his willingness to appear on Sunday before the press was the result of McCord's request. "He gave two reasons for wanting it known that he had cooperated," Dash explained. McCord said it would serve as "protection," and it might also encourage others among the defendants to come forward. Nonetheless, Dash said, his experience with the ensuing publicity and misunderstanding have convinced him that characterization of a witness's testimony "will never happen again."

But the point goes beyond the mere premature characterization of the nature of evidence. The point goes to the visible integrity of the Senate's inquiry. When Dash and the seven members of the Senate have completed their work, we will have to be able to

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believe in their results. They may well be all we shall have that has passed through the process of advocacy and examination.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, denied much of what the press reported as having leaked out of the McCord interview Dash held. In the course of that denial, he pointed to those Dash press appearances and began raising questions about their propriety by saying the press appearances "would not appear to me to be an orderly and judicious method of procedure."

If we are into partisan arguments about orderly process within a month of the start of this inquiry, what hope is there for an end-product that will be broadly acceptable? When next the participants in the Watergate inquiry speak publicly, it would be encouraging to know that question has passed through their minds.