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Ervin Panel Red-Faced At Fake Telephone Call

By William Greider
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The Senate Watergate committee, which is investigating dirty tricks from the 1972 campaign, was the embarrassed victim of one yesterday—a phony report that President Nixon is willing to release secret tape recordings of his crucial White House conversations.

Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr., the committee chairman, first announced dramatically to the national television audience that the White House, via Treasury Secretary George P. Shultz, had agreed to cooperate on the disputed evidence.

A few minutes later, sputtering and chagrined, Chairman Ervin retracted with apologies and diminished faith in the telephone as an instrument of communication.

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them such, who would perpetrate a hoax like this."

After a double-check with the office of the Treasury Secretary, where Shultz was baffled by the episode, the senator from North Carolina accepted the authenticity of Garment's denial.

Ervin announced with a new wariness:

"Notwithstanding the fact that my trust in humanity has been grossly abused by someone, and notwithstanding the fact that some people think the telephone is an instrument of the devil anyway, I am going to assume that the information which counsel received at one end of a telephone line from somebody at the other end was, indeed, information conveyed to them by White House counsel and that the recent information is correct."

Whoever conceived the stunt soon discovered that it was not received around Washington as a lighthearted practical joke. The Justice Department promptly denounced it as a "cruel and irresponsible misrepresentation" and launched an FBI search for the culprit.

Ervin's announcement carried special emotional freight in the Watergate controversy because it seemed to indicate that a nasty confrontation between the White House and the Senate investigators had been avoided. For many, it also implied that, since Mr. Nixon was supposedly releasing the secret tapes, they must contain the evidence that would clear his name and end his troubles.

"I think it is a unanimous opinion of this committee," said Ervin, "that this was a right dirty trick."

At the White House, presidential assistants were aghast at Ervin's unilateral announcement of this major policy shift by Mr. Nixon. They knew it wasn't true. Presidential counsel Leonard Garment blew the whistle on the hoax with a quick telephone call to the Senate Caucus Room where the hearings were under way.

With a pained expression, Sen. Ervin confessed his own gullibility. "It is just an awful thing for a very trusting soul like me," he said, "to find that there are human beings, if you can call

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those hopes were squelched in less than 30 minutes. "I'm eating crow," said Rufus Edmiston, Ervin's aide, the man who led him to the original phone call. "I love a good joke, but this was a little rough."

The hoax was initiated before lunch when a female voice phoned Senator Ervin's personal office and announced that her boss, Secretary Shultz, was on the line with an urgent message. It sounded real enough to send one of Ervin's staff aides, Dan Smith, scampering over to the hearing room with the message. The call was switched to the Caucus Room's phone booth, which is tucked out of sight behind one of those massive Corinthian columns.

Edmiston, the pipe-smoking young man who sits right behind Ervin during the hearings, told the senator that Shultz was on the line with something important.

"I'm in the middle of the hearing," Ervin protested.

"But it's Secretary Shultz," Edmiston insisted.

"Oh, oh, all right," the senator replied.

Edmiston cleared away

other staff people so they wouldn't overhear—including two of Senator Ervin's young grandchildren who were guests for the day. The senator was talking in the booth when the hearings adjourned for lunch and on his way out he told a few reporters that an important announcement would be made later.

But he didn't tell any of his staff lawyers what it was. Chief Counsel Samuel Dash had been talking to White House Counsel Garment earlier in the morning and Garment assured him that a White House policy statement on the tapes wouldn't be ready until Monday.

Ervin went to lunch with his family. He saw the Republican vice chairman, Sen. Howard Baker, on the Senate floor and told him what was up. So when the hearings resumed at 2 p.m., only Ervin and Baker and, of course, the anonymous practical jokers knew what was happening.

"I am pleased to announce," Senator Ervin began, "that Secretary Shultz has called me and asked, advised me that the President has decided to make available to the committee tapes of conversations which may have been with witnesses before the committee which are relevant to the matters which the committee is authorized to investigate."

Ervin gave some details of the supposed arrangements and concluded: "I think it was a very wise decision on the part of the President."

Senator Baker, who had been urging a conciliatory approach in the dispute with the White House, was likewise delighted that the strategy was seemingly so successful.

"I have nothing but commendation for the committee, especially for the chairman, and for the President," Baker said.

At the White House, instead of feeling commended, press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler almost fell out of his chair. He wasn't watching TV but a secretary who was came in to tell him the news. Ziegler flicked on the tube in time to catch the last bouquet from Senator Baker.

He gulped and sprinted for the office of Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., Mr. Nixon's chief of staff. Haig was on the phone, but Ziegler urged him to hang up quickly to deal with the emergency. As it happened, Haig was talking to Secretary Shultz, both of them ignorant of the commotion at the Capitol.

Counsel Garment and special counsel Fred Buzhardt, who handles Watergate matters, both popped into Haig's office, out of breath. The phone rang. It was the President, still recuperating at Bethesda Naval Hospital,

unaware that an important policy shift had just been attributed to him over network television. Ziegler gave him a quick fill-in.

General Haig called Shultz, just to make sure the Treasury Secretary really hadn't done anything like that.

Back at the Senate Caucus Room, Ervin and Baker had finished their announcement. The questioning was resumed. Chief Counsel Dash leaned over and whispered to Senator Ervin.

"That's interesting, isn't it?" Dash said. "Since Garment indicated to me that there wouldn't be a statement until Monday," Ervin replied that Shultz and the President had probably agreed to go forward immediately without consulting

Garment. That seemed reasonable to Dash. But, a moment later, the phone in the Caucus Room was ringing again. It was Garment.

"I would say he was very upset," Dash said later. "Reasonably upset."

Ervin dispatched Edmiston to the phone booth again. "Get the real Shultz on the phone," he told him. Edmiston dialed the Treasury Department and three times asked the answering voice if he was connected with Secretary Shultz's office.

"Secretary Shultz," Edmiston asked, "did you call Senator Ervin this morning?"

"No," said the real Shultz, "what's this all about?"

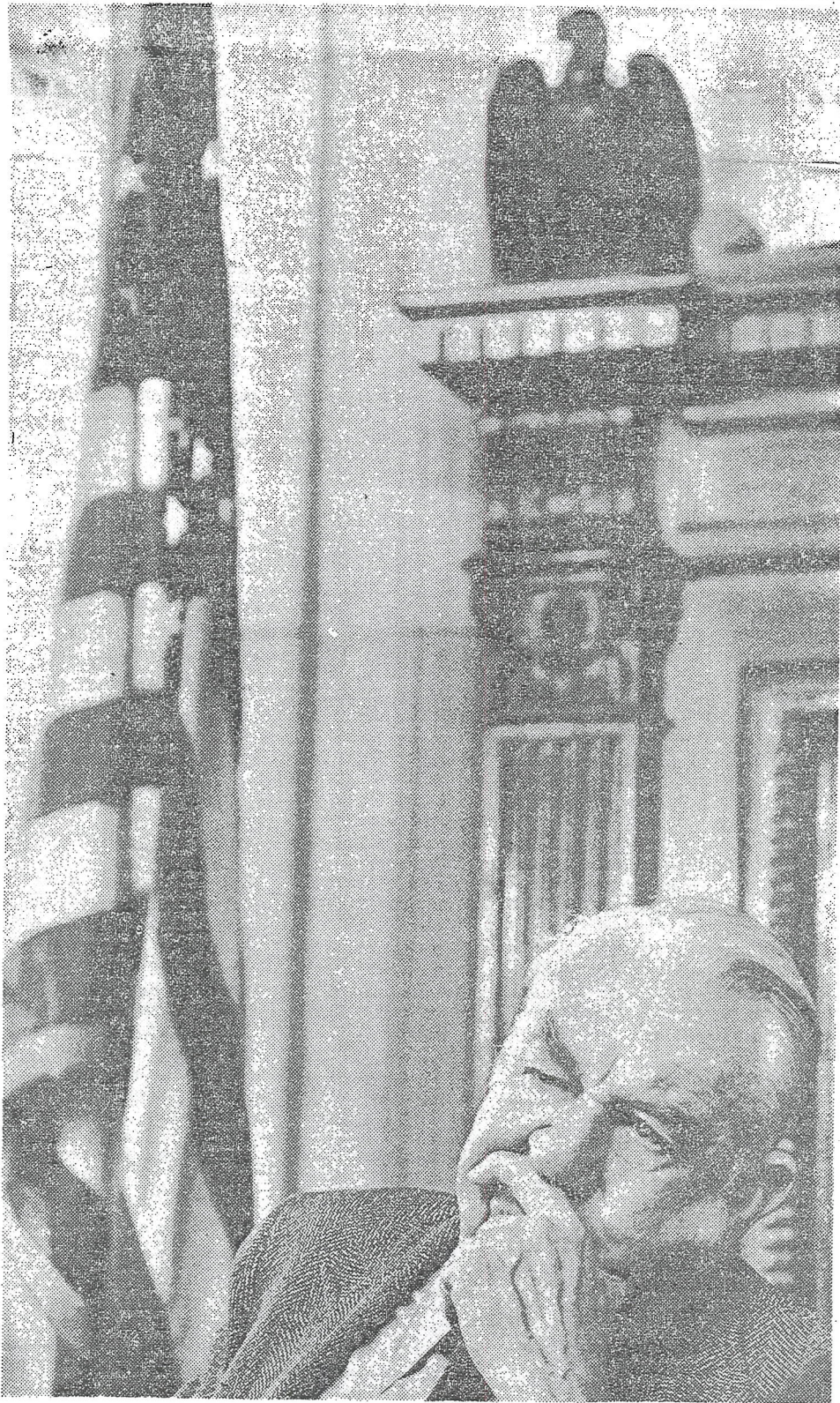
Dash slipped over to the press table to warn the afternoon newspapers whose reporters were already filing stories on the new White House policy. "It may be a hoax," Dash said. The Star-News managed to catch the story before it hit print and re-tell it as a hoax.

"I am not familiar enough with the voice of the secretary to be able to identify it," Ervin explained to the audience, "and so I just assumed that the person at the other end of the line was Secretary Shultz."

Senator Baker added that he would let his words of praise stand—in the hope that they are advance credit for action which the White House might still take.

The power of suggestion prompted a flurry of crank calls. Two men called Senator Ervin's office and each announced that he was the real George Shultz. A woman from Atlanta phoned and said Shultz had given the tapes to her.

More sad than amused, Senator Ervin announced: "I trust that nobody in the future will attempt to deceive and mislead a trusting and unsuspecting individual like the chairman of this committee."



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

"Trusting soul" Ervin strikes a pensive mood following telephone hoax.