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Calling In Your Watergate Questions

Everyone, interrogators, "defendants" and television viewers alike, is agreed that the Senate Watergate hearings had become something of a bore before their recent suspension.

But an awful lot of those bored people also agree that it is absolutely vital to get to the bottom of what is called Watergate and that the hearings are the best chance of accomplishing that.

What clearly is needed, then, is some idea for making the hearings a bit less dull. Permit me a modest "Eureka."

Audience participation is the answer—such an obvious answer that it is astonishing that you had to read it here first. To watch the proceedings for more than 15 minutes at a stretch is to know the throes of unbearable frustration. *Why doesn't the questioner follow up on this? How come they don't ask the witness about that? Are they going to let him get away with the other? Boy, I'd like to ask a question or two!*

What I'm proposing is that at least an hour of each hearing day be set aside for call-in questions. Probably early afternoon, when the frustration sparked by the morning's near-misses would be greatest, would be the best time to do it. Ratings would double in no time, viewer interest would increase 10-fold, and there's an excellent chance that some new information would be developed and a lot of time saved.

Remember when the committee was questioning John Mitchell and the others about how much they had told the President about what they knew? Remember how long it was before anyone got around to asking whether the President had asked them what they knew?

Suppose there had been the opportunity for viewers to phone in questions. You'd have settled that matter right away, wouldn't you?

So it was with countless witnesses and innumerable lines of questioning. You probably don't even remember the name Sally Harmony now, but when she was on camera, remembering absolutely nothing of her work as Gordon Liddy's secretary, you thought of a dozen questions that would have made her squirm. Any secretary who phoned in would have made the point that, while it is possible to copy material on the typewriter without actually reading it, you can't take and transcribe dictation with your mind in neutral.

A case could be made that forcing the Senate committee to give up hearing time to members of the TV audience would stretch the hearings out too long. I think it would probably shorten them, but there's no need to argue the point. The call-in period could just as well be held during the two-hour lunch break, or when the senators leave for a floor vote.

In addition to questions, of course, there could be opportunity for viewers to suggest tactics and strategy.

A friend of mine, given a chance to phone in her suggestion, would never have let the committee make a martyr of the President.

"Every time the muddy footprints led to the door of the Oval Office or Key Biscayne or San Clemente," she says, the questioners should have stopped right *there*. And shaken their heads, more in sorrow than in anger. And clucked their tongues, tut-tut. (Pan in for close-ups; then back off and start another line of questioning.) Let the audience figure out the answers for itself."

The beauty of her suggestion is not that she hates the President (although she doesn't much care for him) but that it shows a good sense of drama, guaranteed to prevent boredom. How can you be bored when you're sitting there solving cosmic mysteries?

There's some question of who would pick up the tab for the phone calls, but that problem is more theoretical than real. There probably wouldn't be that many long-distance calls. In the first place, interest in the whole process is much less intense out in the boon-docks. And in the second, all the really smart people, the ones capable of the devastating query, are, by their own admission, right here in Washington.

There is, of course, no reason why the phone-in device should be limited to the Senate hearing. It could work very well, for instance, with presidential news conferences.

Imagine the kinds of questions you could have asked a President who admitted asking how much it would cost to buy silence and "how do you get the money to them?"—even if in the end he said he decided to drop the idea because "It won't work."

The trouble with having professionals do all the questioning is that they are so busy impressing each other that they forget that they're boring the rest of us to tears.

Audience participation would take care of that. It could also prove mildly embarrassing to the pros. That handsome young senator from Tennessee, for instance, might be a bit chagrined to discover that a lot of us have lost interest in his pet question: "What did the President know, and when did he know it?"

What we'd like to know, as my friend says so eloquently, is: "What the hell has been going on around here?"