

WATERGATE

Hearing drama stars tapes,

Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — It has been called the "Grand Inquest" because it is only the second time in American history that a committee of Congress has met to consider the impeachment of the President.

And yet, for most citizens, the momentous closed-door hearings of the House Judiciary Committee would, for the most part, be a deadly bore.

Inside the sterile, paneled chamber, Room 2141 of the Rayburn House Office Building, the 36 men, most in shirtsleeves, and two women, are arrayed along the two tiers of the raised dais — sitting, slouching or leaning wearily on their hands.

At a long table, below and in front of the members, are the committee lawyers — John Doar, the tall, very proper chief Democratic counsel, who wears white shirts and thin ties, and his Republican counterpart, Albert Jenner, who is partial to bow ties.

Ten feet away is the smaller table for the President's lawyers — James D. St. Clair and John McCahill — who sometimes seem like unwelcome guests. Under committee rules, they can speak only with permission or when spoken to.

Doar does most of the talking, reading from meticulously organized, black-bound, loose-leaf notebooks — copies of which are given to each committee member and the President's lawyers each day, covering only the period under discussion.

By the end of last week's sessions, Doar and Jenner had gone through six of the notebooks, which are filled with documents from the Senate Watergate Committee, other congressional groups, the grand juries and the files of government agencies, including the White House.

But because Doar and Jenner have taken pains to be emotionless and clinical, the story comes out in a monotone.

Some member stare vacantly at their notebooks as Doar drones on, but no one has yet been caught dozing off.

For as the stark and bloodless facts and documents are piled one on the other by Doar, the members of the committee await the next loose-leaf-volume like a serial thriller.

And then they are treated to the actual sounds of Wat-

**Where the
(inaudible)
becomes a
bit more
audible . . .**

ergate coming through time and the hiss of the tape, direct from the Oval Office.

The reel-to-reel tape player, more sophisticated than the equipment used by the White House or the special prosecutor, rests on a small table behind St. Clair, and is run by the committee's crack technician, Bob Halverston.

The tapes, which had been turned over by the President—under subpoena and after long delay—were given to the committee by Federal Judge John Sirica. Halverston copied them and omitted portions Sirica ruled to be irrelevant.

Halverston worked with the tapes, getting behind the hisses, the scratches, the background noises to bring up the (inaudible) and (unintelligible).

And when the tape is played for the committee, each member (plus St. Clair) has his or her own set of expensive stereo ear-phones, a volume control, and a carefully typed and printed, staff-produced transcript of what they are hearing.

Doar has used the tapes to punctuate a point or show what was actually happening behind the public face of the White House.

Thus, citing public "presidential papers," Doar noted the announcement, on June 30, 1972, that there was "no White House involvement" in Watergate.

But in a conversation taped that very day, then chief of staff H. R. Halde-man after meeting and phoning furiously to keep the Watergate lid on, warned the President: "You run the risk of more stuff, valid or invalid, surfacing."

And the President agreed: "Yes, that's the other thing, if something does come out, but we won't . . . we hope nothing will."

Some committee members have said that, except for

the tapes, there have been few surprises or places of evidence not turned up by other committees and investigators.

They are looking for the bombshell, the one dramatic piece of evidence that will make it all come clear.

The real world of the lawyer-investigator is not like that.

A case is built, bit by bit, with mundane facts, known evidence and circumstance which point towards guilt or innocence.

It has become clear, from what has been presented to the Judiciary Committee, that Doar is putting together a rather tight circumstantial case.

And even committee Republicans, like Hamilton Fish of New York, say the weight of circumstance is beginning to lean against the President.

So far, such conclusions as may be drawn have not been drawn by Doar. He has carefully avoided making inferences or even linking the facts he has recited to the committee.

That will be up to the members, said a committee spokesman, when they begin asking Doar to put his facts in context. And some members already have drawn their conclusions.

But it has become evident that few, if any, members had kept track of the twists and turns of Watergate.

Democrat John Seiberling candidly says he's "playing lazy" and letting the staff do the work. Ranking Republican Edward Hutchinson of Michigan is seen as a bump on the committee log. And Fish says, rather typically, that through the months of Watergate he had more to do than pay attention to the

details of the scandal.

Some members of the committee have little inclination to do investigation and thinking of their own. For example, when Doar has played the Watergate tapes, no member thought to bring in a copy of the White House transcripts to compare.

Next week, despite pressure from some members,

the press and the White House, the closed door hearings will continue, at least until all the President's tapes are played.

Then it will be time to open the doors, let the television cameras in and see if the House Judiciary Committee and the historic question of impeachment can compete with Perry Mason.