

Unanswered Questions Plague a Tough Judge

By Peter Osnos

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Throughout the Watergate trial, Chief Judge John J. Sirica of U.S. District Court sought to push the bounds of inquiry beyond the break-in at the Democratic National Committee into the broader motives of the culprits and the people who directed them.

The questions as posed by the crusty, blunt-spoken 69-year-old judge at an early pre-trial hearing were these: "What did these men go into that headquarters for? Was their sole purpose political espionage? Were they paid? Was there financial gain? Who hired them? Who started this?"

At the end of the trial, the judge tartly observed that the answers had not been forthcoming.

"Everybody knows that there's going to be a congressional investigation," Sirica said, "I would frankly hope, not only as a judge but as a citizen of a great country and one of millions of Americans who are looking for certain answers, I would hope that the Senate committee (will) get to the bottom of what happened in this case."

And once again yesterday, in considering sentences for the seven defendants, Sirica implored them to speak out and co-operate with the Senate investigators and a continuing grand jury probe into the Watergate incident. "Some good can and should come from a revelation of sinister conduct whenever and wherever such conduct exists," Sirica said.

The judge's public comments apparently reflect his private dismay over what he regards as an assault on the American political system. "He feels very strongly about the whole affair," one of Sirica's colleagues said yesterday afternoon, "he's very disappointed that something like this could happen in the United States."

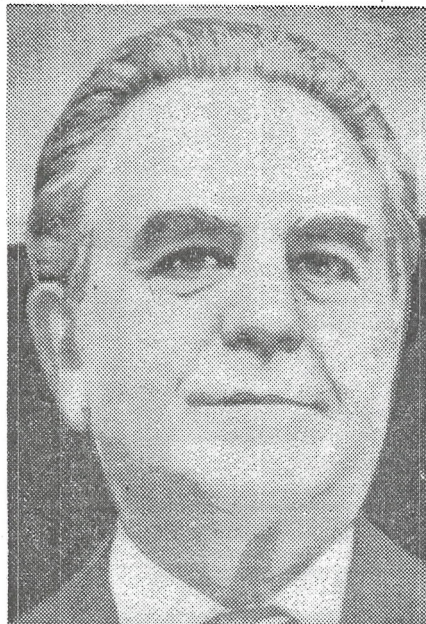
John J. Sirica is the son of an Italian immigrant. He was once a prizefighter and worked his way through Georgetown Law School by working as an athletic instructor. He was appointed to the bench by President Eisenhower in 1957 after serving for several years as a federal prosecutor and establishing a successful private practice.

Since becoming a judge, Sirica has won a reputation for toughness, especially in criminal cases. "Maximum John," the courthouse regulars call him in recognition of his propensity for handing out severe sentences.

But coupled with that stern view of lawbreakers is a judicial evenhandedness that has won him the respect of the local bar. He likes to boast of his determined political neutrality.

"I have been through some of these political cases," he said during one of the Watergate court hearings last fall, "but no political party, Republican or Democratic has a monopoly on honesty or integrity."

Sirica's handling of the Watergate trial has shown him to be more than a routinely activist judge. At one point,



JOHN SIRICA

early on, he issued an order prohibiting anyone connected with case from publicly discussing it.

The order was so broad that it threatened to restrict the statements of Democratic Presidential nominee George McGovern. Sirica backed down.

Later, he sent the bureau chief of the Los Angeles Times to jail for several hours after the reporter refused to turn over material subpoenaed by the prosecution. The reporter was freed by an appellate court and the material eventually turned over.

In the midst of the trial, Sirica belittled his long-time Republican contacts. "The Republican National Committee," he said, "is just another political organization. They don't have all the rights in the world you know, the right to hire somebody, to go into a place like the Democratic National Committee and bug that committee."

The tension of the trial and the strain of hard work has taken its toll on the judge, his friends say, but he tells them it is worth it because of the importance of the case. Sirica appointed himself to handle the trial after prosecutors asked him to find the best available judge.

Judge Sirica married when he was 47 and has three children, the oldest of them is 19. With them, say long-time associates, he is gentle and forbearing. His private demeanor, they say, belies his public firmness.