

Watergate Panel Halts Secret Talks

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The Senate's Watergate select committee, confronted by White House criticism and news leaks, announced yesterday that it will hold no more preliminary hearings to accept secret testimony before the full committee.

At the same time, committee member Sen. Lowell P. Weicker (R-Conn.), continued his criticism of H. R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, and asked that Haldeman resign.

Sen. Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C.), chairman of the Watergate committee, said yesterday that public hearings will open within 10 days and in the interim the committee's staff will continue secretly to question witnesses.

Senate sources said yesterday that the immediate staff investigation will focus on allegations by convicted Watergate conspirator James W. McCord Jr. that superiors in the conspiracy told him that high presidential aides had advance knowledge of the Watergate bugging. McCord's secret testimony to the full committee last Wednesday was widely reported.

Ervin's announcement came after a half-hour closet-door meeting of the committee. The move will probably have the effect of limiting access to the staff findings to Ervin and Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), the ranking minority member, and keeping it from the five other senators on the committee.

In another development yesterday, former White House aide G. Gordon Liddy, another Watergate conspirator, was held in contempt of court and sentenced to an additional nine months in prison for refusing to answer questions before the federal grand jury that is also investigating the case.

Sen. Weicker, in calling for Haldeman's resignation, charged that the presidential aide "clearly has to accept responsibility" for political espionage and sabotage con-

See SELECT, A12, Col. 1

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ducted on behalf of the President's re-election.

Citing information he said he received from highly-placed Republican officials, Weicker said that he has been told: "We just didn't do anything without checking with Mr. Haldeman."

Weicker did not charge Haldeman with direct knowledge of the illegal Watergate bugging or other violations of the law, but said the chief of staff set a tone to the election campaign condoning political disruption and sabotage.

"There wasn't anybody hired by the Committee for the Re-election of the President who wasn't cleared by Haldeman," Weicker said, adding that he did not blame any of the espionage on President Nixon himself.

"This matter was turned over to his chief of staff," Weicker said. "That's exactly where I leave it at this point in time." Weicker said that the clandestine acts of the 1972 campaign are "foreign to the President's M.O. (method of operation in politics.)"

According to Senate sources, Sen. Ervin's announcement that the full seven-member Watergate committee would hear no more secret testimony from witnesses was in large part an attempt to place control of the investigation in the hands of Samuel Dash, the committee's chief counsel.

It is normal procedure in Senate and House investigations for the chief counsel to run the investigation, keeping the chairman and ranking minority member informed of the findings.

Last Wednesday's closed-door session of the full committee to hear McCord under oath was an unusual procedure during a Senate investigation in its early stages, according to Capitol Hill sources. One source called the McCord testimony "a disaster because of the leaks that followed and impeached the credibility of the work of the committee."

In a brief press release yesterday, Ervin said: "The committee does not anticipate a recurrence of these circumstances with respect to Mr.

McCord or any other individual from whom the committee may seek information."

McCord had requested last Wednesday's meeting with the committee after information that he had earlier supplied to chief counsel Dash had been reported in the press.

In comments to reporters yesterday, Ervin made it clear that he suspects McCord or his lawyers of leaking the information to the press.

"There's been some outside parties before the committee in the person of Mr. McCord and his attorneys," Ervin said. "There are indications that maybe for some reason some of them may have done some talking. I don't think it was members of the committee."

In the press release, Ervin said that any person refusing to cooperate with the committee investigation "may be subpoenaed to appear at a time certain before authorized members of the committee staff to provide necessary information. If need be, the chairman or the vice chairman (Sen. Baker) of the committee will appear at such a meeting to administer an oath."

According to Senate sources, McCord, basing his assertions primarily on statements allegedly made to him by Liddy, testified that former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, presidential counsel John W. Dean III, and former White House aide Jeb Stuart Magruder had advance knowledge of the Watergate bugging.

Saying there were additional hearsay statements from another Watergate conspirator, E. Howard Hunt Jr., McCord testified that Charles W. Colson also had advance knowledge.

Mitchell, Dean, Magruder and Colson have all denied any advance knowledge or involvement in the Watergate bugging.

McCord, whom Senate sources generally considered a reliable witness, made his statements to the Senate committee in the face of a 45-year prison term. U.S. District Chief Judge John J. Sirica has postponed sentencing McCord until June 15 and made it clear that McCord's cooperation will be a factor in determining the final sentence.