

Scene at Probe-- A Solemn Circus

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Washington

Precisely at 10 a.m. yesterday Sam J. Ervin Jr. hefted the new gavel carved for him by a Cherokee Indian, then rapped it on a long table cloaked in green felt and the 1972 presidential campaign went on trial in the Senate.

A bearded young man in a paint-spattered T-shirt stood on an oaken bench at the rear of the Senate Caucus Room to stare across more than 300 spectators. Daniel Ellsberg craned his neck from his fifth-row seat to squint into the glare of 11 klieg lights. Four television cameras focused on Ervin, the North Carolina Democrat.

"We are beginning these hearings today in an atmosphere of the utmost gravity," he said.

The start of the long, public, nationally televised proceedings of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities seemed as deliberately low-key as the title of the seven-senator investigating panel.

Its members listened intently as the personnel director of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, a pointer in one hand and microphone in the other, discussed yellow boxes and familiar names on organizational charts. They questioned a minor White House official at length on the daily schedules in the executive mansion as he sat sedately behind a battered table draped in brown felt.

No marks were made on the large map of the U.S. — land areas in pastel green, water in naval blue — directly behind Ervin and labeled, importantly, "opera-

tions and movements of witnesses and participants."

But the first day of the hearings merely set the scene and identified the principal figures in Watergate — a word that has come to denote political intrigue — and the attention of the capital, perhaps of the nation, seemed to be riveted on Room 318 of the Old Senate Office Building.

Fifteen minutes after the hearing began, Senator William R. Brock III (Rep-

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Tenn.), entered the caucus room as a spectator. "Has he heated up yet?" he asked another onlooker.

In a corner, next to TV monitors and electronic cables, stood Senator Walter D. Huddleston (Dem-Ky.)

"I'm not going to stay long," he said, "but every time I talk to somebody back home they say, 'Hell, there's nothing going on up there but Watergate.' I figured I might as well get a look."

VOTES

Formal floor proceedings in the Senate were adjusted so that roll call votes would occur only during the Watergate committee's luncheon recess, enabling the seven senators to probe without interruption into what Lowell P. Weicker Jr., (Rep-Conn.) called "acts of men who almost stole America."

The House met for 16 minutes, just long enough to amend and adopt a resolution setting June 24 as the beginning of National Autistic Children's Week. Then many scurried back to offices where they joined secretaries in watching the hearings on television.

Lines of 150 or more persons clogged the foyer of the

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Old Senate Office Building as the public sought access to the hearings. Sure it was on television, said one man, but you had to be there, like opening day of the baseball season.

It was the most significant hearing on Capitol Hill since 1954, when Senator Joseph McCarthy and Joseph Welch, special counsel for the Army, sparred in the same Senate Caucus Room for 35 days of televised hearings on the propriety of the senator's hunt for Communists in the military.

Nineteen years ago, Henry Rosenberg of New York was there to film "Point of Order!" — the documentary by Emile de Antonio on McCarthy. Yesterday his daughters, Gail, 18, and Carol, 16, stood in the line with housewives and law students, sleeping bags tucked under their arms.

"I want to see it live," Gail Rosenberg said. "It has a more emotional basis for me."

Senator James D. Abourez (Dem-S.D.), was there for a few minutes to see

what it was like.

"It's a circus," he said. "I'm told that the White House is more concerned about this than about the grand jury."

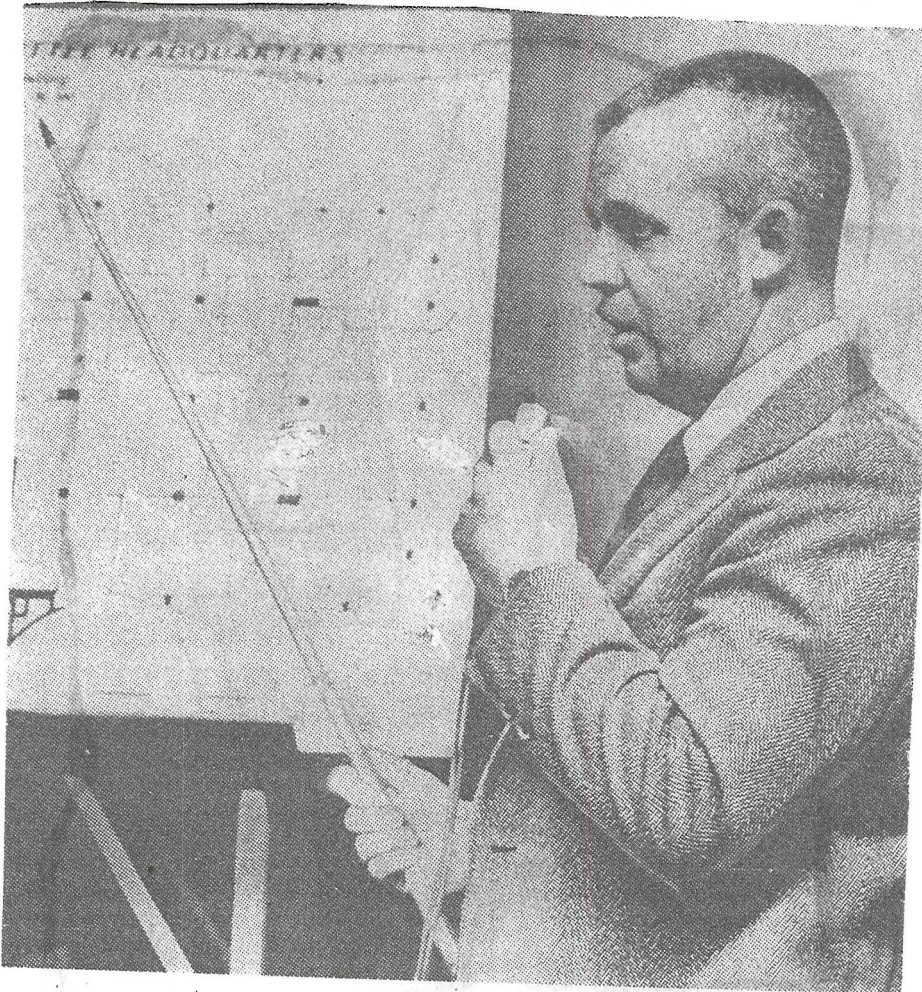
His point may have been well taken.

"This committee is not a court, nor is it a jury," declared Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. (Rep-Tenn.), in his opening statement.

In one sense, however, congressional investigations do serve as courts and the public as juries. Those roles are amplified by the live presentation of the proceedings.

The investigations into organized crime, conducted on television by senator Estes Kefauver in 1951, helped propel him to national attention and to the 1952 Democratic nomination for the vice presidency.

The 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings of the Senate permanent investigating subcommittee produced an official report that was largely inconclusive, assigning fault both to the Army and to McCarthy.



WASHINGTON POLICE SERGEANT PAUL LEEPER UPI Telephoto
He told the committee about making the Watergate arrests

But the blustering approach of McCarthy and the righteous indignation of Welch had a more fundamental impact in 1954. The Gallup Poll taken when the Army-McCarthy hearings were concluded showed that 89 per cent of the public

had followed the televised proceeding and the 52 per cent believed that McCarthy had used "improper" tactics. Six months later he was formally censured by the Senate.

Thus the Watergate committee took pains yesterday to assert dedication to careful, undramatic search for facts, and Baker asserted that "it is the American people who must be the final judge of Watergate."