

A Low-Key Beginning Before a Rapt Audience

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WASHINGTON, May 17— Precisely at 10 A.M., 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 today in the Senate.

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

"We are beginning these hearings today in an atmosphere of the utmost gravity," he said, his words echoing off colonnaded marble.

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 di-

rector of the Committee for the Re-election of the President, a pointer in one hand and a 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 United States—land areas in pastel green, water in naval blue—directly behind Chairman Ervin and labeled "Operations 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 Watergate hearing began,

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Senator Bill Brock, Republican of Tennessee, entered the Caucus Room as a spectator. "Has it heated up yet?" he asked another onlooker.

In a corner, next to telecrat of Kentucky.

"I'm not going to stay long," he said, "but every time I talk to somebody back home vision monitors and electro-Walter D. Huddleston, Demonic cables, stood Senator they say, 'Hell, there's nothing going on up there but Watergate.' I figured I might as well get a look."

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 press, without interrupting their inquiry into what Lowell P. Weicker Jr., Republican of Connecticut, called "acts of men who almost stole America."

The House of Representatives 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 of the Representatives scurried back

to offices where they joined secretaries in watching the Watergate hearings on television.

Constant lines of 150 or more persons clogged the foyer of the 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 R. McCarthy and the Army's special lawyer, Joseph N. Welch, 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 Manhattan was there to help film "Point of Order!"—the documentary on Senator McCarthy, a Wisconsin Republican. Today his daughters, Gail 18 years old, and Carol, 16, stood in line with housewives and law students, sleeping bags under their arms, to await a glimpse of the Watergate hearing.

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

Senators' wives — Mrs. Ervin among them—and a few other prominent persons were able to obtain seats in the Caucus Room. Dr. Ellsberg, who had been a defendant in the Pentagon papers conspiracy case until that became so enmeshed with the figures involved in Watergate and a Federal judge in Los Angeles dismissed the Government charges against him, set unobtrusively in the audience as a guest of Senator Edmund S. Muskie, Democrat of Maine.

"I'm here," Dr. Ellsberg said, "to pay my respects to the independent legislative branch."

Senator James D. Abourezk, Democrat of South Dakota, was there, for a few minutes, just 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., Republican of Tennessee, 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 1956 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 the Senator.

But the blustering approach of Senator McCarthy and the righteous indignation of Mr. 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 proceedings and that 52 per cent believed Mr. McCarthy had used "improper" tactics.



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Students and others crowded into the Caucus Room of the Old Senate Office Building yesterday to hear the opening session of the public Watergate hearings.

A Low-Key Beginning for Hearings