

## Confronting the Truth

Government lawyers and some laymen are worried that the Senate Watergate hearings are inhibiting active prosecution and may even preclude a fair trial for some of the key conspirators. To this criticism, Senator Ervin said Sunday: "I think it is much more important for the American people to know—and Congress to find out—what happened, than to send one or two people to jail."

While the need for impartial justice in prosecuting those who betrayed their public trust by violating the laws cannot be minimized, Senator Ervin is right in contending that the overriding concern in this noisome affair must be full disclosure. The stunning point about the Watergate morass is not so much any specific violations of the law—dismaying though many of these were—but rather the whole web of deception and extra-legal behavior practiced at the highest levels of the United States Government. After all the country has been put through, it would be a most unworthy denouement merely to have a few officials convicted of specific crimes and packed off to jail for a few years, as if that ended the matter.

Far more important for the public good is that the full panoply of cynicism and moral rot be exposed to view; such disclosure is the best insurance against a rebirth of the Watergate mentality ever again in American political history.

In principle, there is no conflict between the functions of the Senate Select Committee and the Government prosecutors, including the special Watergate prosecutor, Archibald Cox. The latter have the responsibility of ferreting out violations of the law and bringing wrongdoers to punishment. The former have the equally somber responsibility of recommending new laws to protect the political process from fraud and deception.

In the Watergate conspiracy, the conflict arises over the granting of immunity to key witnesses, with the risk that central figures in the maze of corruption might never have to go to jail. Some lawyers argue that evidence sufficient for convictions can be assembled without the testimony of individuals who are demanding immunity. Perhaps this will be true, but it would be unfortunate for the public confidence and the future of the political process if the chance to lay bare all the decay of the Watergate were gravely impaired.

Shameful crimes were committed in the espionage operations that surfaced at the Watergate. But the most awesome crime of all was the monstrous one committed against the public trust; for that crime the acid punishment is not to languish in jail, it is to confront the truth.