

Determining Mr. Nixon's Role

By general agreement of his colleagues, Herman Talmadge of Georgia is one of the ablest, most national minded men now in the Senate. He is also an influential member of the main committee investigating the Watergate horror. Hence some remarks of his are now highly pertinent.

"You can't tell how long this thing is going to go on, any more than you can tell how long it will take to unroll a ball of string," Senator Talmadge has said about the Watergate investigation. "But one thing any damn fool can tell. It will be bad for the country—in fact it can be really dangerous for the country—to go on much longer without knowing the truth about the President."

Senator Talmadge has therefore approached the chairman of the Watergate investigating committee, Sen. Sam J. Ervin of North Carolina, with a tentative proposal that makes tremendous good sense. The proposal is to take immediate steps to get to the bottom of President Nixon's real degree of involvement in the Watergate horror, while leaving the roles of the President's subordinates for later inquiry.

This would be relatively simple to do. On the basis of all the evidence to date, there are only five men who can now testify to the President's personal knowledge and complicity, or clear him from all material charges of knowledge and complicity—as the case may be. These five are the former Attorney General John Mitchell; the Republican bagman, Maurice Stans; and the three key White House staff members, H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson.

Daily we hear what the President was thought to have wanted—but always at second hand. Lt. Gen. Vernon Walters, deputy director of the CIA, has recorded in a memo that the once all-powerful Haldeman told him it was "the President's wish" to use the CIA to block part of the early investigation of Watergate. John J. Caulfield has testified that he "felt the President probably knew about it," when he offered executive clemency to the people who made the Watergate break-in.

No one so far has testified, however, "the President told me," or "the President requested," or "the

President ordered." The chances are immensely high, too, that no one can so testify—at least without committing perjury—except for Mitchell, Stans, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Colson.

What Senator Talmadge therefore has in mind is calling these five men out of order, without further delay, and without prejudice to subsequent orderly investigation of their own actions. They would be on the stand under oath. This time around, they would be asked solely about the President's role. In fact they would only need to be shown the seven denials in the President's Watergate state-

ment of Tuesday. They could then be asked bluntly:

"Are these statements by the President true or false, to the best of your knowledge and belief?" If a single one of the five said there was untruth in any of the President's denials, that would be the proper signal for serious consideration of impeachment.

On the other hand, if all five of these men supported the truth of the presidential denials, that would be the effective end of the poisonous talk about the President's own knowledge and complicity in the worst of what has been going on. The darkest, ugliest aspect of the Watergate horror would then be over—barring some enormous surprise from one of the obscure bottom-dwelling slugs who

seem to have infested the White House until recently.

As Senator Talmadge remarked, moreover, it is desperately dangerous to go on as we are going, with the President's guilt or innocence always in doubt. The shadow of Watergate is known to have hung heavily on the Vietnam negotiations in Paris. The threat to the value of the dollar, the threat of galloping inflation, the threat that the energy crisis will get out of control—all these are also demanding immediate and bold action.

No president in Richard M. Nixon's present position can be expected to take this kind of action with much hope of success. But if the air is cleared in the manner desired by Senator Talmadge, the President will

again be free to act as the country's interests require. He will not be free, of course, of the ghastly responsibility for surrounding himself with the men who gave orders in his name—false orders, if the President has told the truth in his latest statement.

Yet having a President who is again free to act is an immense objective in itself, at least in present circumstances. Getting the worst over quickly, one way or another, will not of course appeal to partisan Democrats, or ambitious investigators, or others who want the agony to be delightfully prolonged. But as Senator Talmadge has drily said: "the country matters, too."