

The Truth-Seekers

Archibald Cox was at least half right in requesting the Ervin committee to knock off its Watergate hearings until he finished his job as special prosecutor in the case.

But my heart jumped with joy when Sen. Sam Ervin turned him down.

Behind that reaction lies a terrible attitude which I wish I didn't have and hope you don't share. But I suspect many people do share it.

It is an almost total lack of faith in our legal systems as the tool to get at the truth in the Watergate affair — or anything else of consequence.

It is an attitude that regards courts of law as tailor shops where the truth is cut and trimmed and altered to suit the buyer's desires.

Cox was probably right when he complained that the televised hearings of Senator Ervin's committee jeopardize prosecution of the guilty parties. But I believe he was dead wrong when he added:

"The continuation of the hearings at this time would create grave danger that the full facts about the Watergate case and related matters will never come to light."

★ ★ ★

I AM CONVINCED of the opposite. It's in trusting to the courts that we run the greater risk of letting the truth slip away from us.

And if we must choose between the two, in the Watergate affair it's more important that we learn the truth than that someone goes to jail.

My distrust of the courts stems from something more substantial than the phobia of a disturbed mind. When high political stakes are involved, the performance of the courts in getting at the truth has been pretty dismal.

Need I remind you of the Chappaquiddick coverup? A compliant magistrate let Ted Kennedy write the rules for the hear-

ing, rules that could be paraphrased as, "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies."

Does anyone doubt that James Earl Ray was acting as the agent of more powerful men when he assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? Someone provided Ray with an escape route through Canada, a fake passport and a new identity in London — all quite out of character and beyond the imagination of a hill-billy jailbird.

And yet Ray was allowed to plead guilty and take the rap alone with no questions asked, while an obliging judge and an apathetic prosecutor showed less curiosity than a garden slug.

Can we trust the pursuit of truth to such men? Or to a legal system in which such men rise to success?

★ ★ ★

BEYOND SUCH instances of deliberate failure to inquire, the courtroom game offers its players a vast array of objections and motions and maneuvers designed to prevent the truth from being told, even when a witness is eager to tell it.

Not a day goes by in this land but what some grotesque injustice is committed in the courts because a key piece of information was suppressed by legal strategem.

On the Watergate affair we mustn't allow the truth to be distorted by some clever lawyer's objections.

Cox wanted the Senate hearings postponed for three months while he did his work. But any defense attorney worth his salt can stall a trial for three months. And afterward would come the endless appeals, during which time the same rationale for postponing the hearings would prevail.

That mustn't happen. The government of this nation has been becalmed by the Watergate affair. It will remain becalmed until we find out the truth about Watergate. And the courts, unfortunately, are an unreliable place to look for the truth.