

NYTimes *Letters to the Editor*

The Ervin Hearings and the Pursuit of Truth

JUN 11 1973

To the Editor:

Senator Sam Ervin was stating a truism when he told John J. Caulfield that "our greatest conflicts arise when we must choose between our loyalties." The current debate raging over whether Senator Ervin's committee should continue his open, televised hearings represents such a choice for the American people.

The choice is whether we want the truth to come out as soon, as clearly and as openly as possible or whether we want to rely on the slow, secretive and technical process of the judicial system. On the one hand, our faith in and loyalty to the American system of checks and balances is pulling at us; on the other hand, our faith and loyalty to a "rule of law" is strongly at work.

In a normal case, I think most of us would favor the latter choice; but there are, I think, many points in favor of choosing the first procedure in view of the unique seriousness of the matter:

¶Public cynicism: Distrust of any form of secretive procedure in relation to this case is obvious among the American electorate. Re-establishing some semblance of faith in the system of checks and balances is more important than extracting some form of legal vengeance against those guilty. At this time, the plea for semisecretive criminal procedures reeks of a last-gasp effort to conceal whatever can be concealed.

¶Expediency: The United States Government is in a state of near-paralysis and will remain that way as long as the Watergate affair is unclear. Open hearings are the fastest way to get the facts out in the open. This affair is a predominantly political affair, and if we are to follow the intentions of the Constitution, the facts must be open to political debate as soon as possible. We must do our best to keep politics separate from the legal proceedings; but the former takes precedence over the latter.

¶Public censure: It is always important in a society that respects law to prosecute those guilty of a crime. But in this case, public censure of the guilty would be as effective as prosecution. The diabolical and arrogant nature of the affair is the real cancer, and that cancer must be openly and forthrightly exposed and eliminated from our political system.

The point of the Ervin hearings is to re-establish true legitimacy in our political process. Whether Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Dean, Mitchell et al., spend one day in jail matters little to me. If they are proven guilty but spared jail sentences because of legal technicalities, their disgrace and dishonor will not be any less real, and that will be vengeance enough.

The important point is that our political system must be set aright as quickly as possible.

BILL DICKENS
East Lansing, Mich., June 4, 1973

To the Editor:

The George Washington syndrome is a malady that is now well endemic in our culture and has perhaps spread to others. This is the ploy so well used by little George when he successfully avoided punishment by his father by simply owning up about his cherry-tree axing. Not only did he avoid punishment, he was even lauded for "telling the truth."

Since little George's day that the myth has become not only a well-ingrained lesson for every American schoolchild but sometimes a useful tool of the manipulator.

Obviously, the truth is to be respected. But one cannot help think back to little George when one becomes exposed to the use of the syndrome in our daily lives. Senator Sam Ervin of the Watergate committee was even blatant in his use of it when he announced that "we are not interested in putting anyone in jail, but in just getting to the truth."

We must not allow ourselves to be duped further by those who would carry out criminal acts and then claim immunity from punishment simply because they "own up." By the same token, everyone who is guilty of a crime would merely plead so to avoid retribution.

Good citizens are required to be honest in action, not only in word.

DON SLOAN, M.D.
New York, June 3, 1973