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Watergate's Baker— 'Howard's Not Even a Kisser'

Washington

WHEN THE Watergate Show goes back on TV tomorrow, former Attorney General John Mitchell will appear as a special guest. He'll get a lot of attention.

But the man just as many people will be watching will be one of the regular cast members, a good-looking, molasses-voiced senator from Tennessee named Howard Baker Jr.

Baker, a 47-year-old Republican, was scarcely known before the hearings began. Many of those who were aware of him saw him merely as the son-in-law of the late Senator Everett Dirksen.

By now, however, the minority vice-chairman of the select Senate committee investigating Watergate has clearly emerged as one of the more attractive characters on view, which has inspired considerable speculation about Baker as a presidential aspirant in '76. But there also are rumblings about whether he has been "planted" on the committee by the White House.

After all, say his critics, he's been President Nixon's friend since 1952, seconded his nomination, campaigned for him, was offered a Supreme Court seat by his attorney general. He says he admires Nixon and adds that "his (Nixon's) great historical accomplishments are being overshadowed."

Baker admits that his 17-year-old daughter, Cynthia (called Cissy), regards Julie Eisenhower as her "idol," and that his wife, Joy, is a Nixon fan and predicts the President will come out of Watergate "smelling like a rose . . . stronger than ever."

How then, ask Baker's critics, can he be expected to remain impartial? How instrumental was the White House in the choice of a minority counsel?

To these and similar questions, Baker replies that he will pursue the truth about Watergate even if it leads him to the highest reaches of the White House.

There appears to be no question about the closeness

of the Baker and Nixon families and the warmth they feel for each other. On June 15, they all flew to Pekin, Ill., for the dedication of the Dirksen memorial library. Joy Baker describes the event this way:

"The President grabbed Pat and my mother and got them up there on the podium and gave 'em this (waving her arms in the air). And there were 15,000 people clapping and cheering."

Then mother got Howard and Cissy and me up there, and the President very politely turned around to Cissy and said, 'Tell your father to bug off.' And he and Cissy stood up there huggin' and carryin' on."

Since the hearings began, Baker's office has been receiving about 300 letters a day, most of them laudatory.

"I am a McGovern Democrat and I am not easily given to complimenting Republicans," wrote Sister Maureen Fiedler, RSM. "You are an exception. In fact, you appear to be presidential timber. Your honesty, integrity and intelligence impress me as by far above what we now have in the White House."

He also gets mash notes from teen-age girls who are disappointed when they find out he's married and from septuagenarian grandmothers, and he's hugged in restaurants and kissed on the streets. None of this bothers his wife.

"My daddy was a kisser," she says. "He loved the girls and it never bothered my mother. And Howard's not even a kisser. So why should I be concerned?"

If it doesn't concern his wife, it does befuddle Baker, who was born and reared in Huntsville, Tenn. (population: 300).

"It embarrasses me," Baker draws.

His friends and family say he's always been shy and had to be prodded into introducing himself to folks when he was running for office. Now he's gotten the hang of it and he relishes stumping through towns such as Stupid-



Baker and Senator Sam Ervin: Can he remain impartial?



Baker and his wife, Joy, on a walk with their Saint Bernard

ville, Burrville and Nosey Valley on a flatbed truck with a hillbilly band.

Even so, Baker would rather be behind a camera than in front of it.

"Last summer during the convention," said one journalist, "when people like (Senator Charles) Percy and Agnew were running around in starched cotton and pin-stripes trying to get their faces on TV, Baker was lying on the floor, climbing on chairs and hanging from the rafters in a T-shirt and his penny loafers, taking pictures of the delegates."

He's already considered what it might be like to run for president.

"I have had my private conference with myself about running and I came away terrified," he said. "Not terrified, but it's a frightening experience for anyone who reaches the point where they feel they ought to give it some thought. And I reached a few fundamental conclusions.

"One, I don't have to think seriously about it for the moment. Two, to do it would be a disservice to the duties I'm trying to perform. Three, I don't think I'd like to be president. My personal self says it's a bum trip. You've got long black cars, lavish airplanes, a rather desirable address, but it's an extraordinary thing to contemplate in terms of your private life.

"But four, I would not be afraid to be president."

Joy Baker admits she wouldn't mind if her husband was president: "At least I'd get to see him for lunch every day."

The Watergate hearings, of course, have disrupted the Bakers' life to some extent. Baker has had to forego his weekly tennis with Spiro Agnew and GOP chief George Bush. He's also had to halt work on a book of photos and he's stopped flying his plane.

At home, he and Joy do not discuss Watergate, he says.

"Of course, I don't want to know more than I read in the papers," says Joy. "I have a tendency of occasionally talking out of turn."

Cissy Baker does ask questions, but the Bakers' 20-year-old son, Darek, does not. He's a dropout from the University of Tennessee, now employed as a construction worker.

"Between girls and cars and working as a day laborer, he ain't got no time for Watergate," says Baker in a mock hillbilly accent. "He only watches Kung Fu."

Women's Wear Daily