

Each Senator on His Own In Questioning Witnesses

NYTimes

By DAVID E. ROSENBAUM JUL 12 1973

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 11—"I listen to the others and try to establish a principal line that I'm interested in. And then I try to bore in on it."

That is the way Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. describes the way he prepares to question the Watergate witnesses.

More often than not, the line the Tennessee Republican chooses involves an effort to discover the motives of the witnesses. And, with no pre-drafted questions—just a few scribbled notes—in front of him, he tries to get inside the minds of those involved in the Watergate conspiracy.

Other Senators have different routines. Herman E. Talmadge gets up every morning before 4 o'clock and begins developing his questions. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. prepares his questions at daily sessions with his staff, some lasting well into the night and others beginning at 7 A.M. Daniel K. Inouye comes in each morning with a neatly typed list of questions that he wants answered and patiently crosses them off, one by one, if they are asked before he gets his turn.

Queries Not Coordinated

There is seldom coordination among the seven Senators on who will ask which questions. And only rarely does the committee staff suggest a question for a Senator to ask.

Rather, after several hours together under the glaring television lights, the Senators return separately to their offices and begin their preparation routines, which they have developed since the hearings began two months ago.

Senator Baker, who may be the most adroit interrogator, says that he enjoys having other committee members take their turn first. That way, he says, the substantive questions have already been asked, and he has what he calls "maximum freedom to ask what I want."

Often, as he did with John N. Mitchell today, the Tennessee Senator begins indirectly. "Would you tell me, Mr. Mitchell, what is your perception of the institution of the Presidency?" he asked.

AS Mr. Baker had apparently expected, Mr. Mitchell sidestepped such a broad question. But, with that as an opening, Mr. Baker gradually got around to the heart of his inquiry.

A Rhetorical Question

"Is the Presidency so shrouded in mystique," Mr. Baker asked, "is there such an aura of magnificence about the Presidency, is there such an awesome responsibility for a multitude of problems and undertakings of this nation that the Presidency in some instances must be spared the detail, must be spared the difficulty of situations which in more ordinary circumstances might be considered by some at least to be frank, open declarations of criminal offense?"

It was a rhetorical question, but it enabled Senator Baker to express his distress at the thought that aides like Mr. Mitchell were making decisions that Mr. Baker feels should have been made by Richard M. Nixon.

Ad, with that and similar questions, the Senator was able to wring from Mr. Mitchell the admission that he had worked to protect not inform, the President, and that it was "improper" for him to have done so.

Just as Senator Baker tries to establish the motives of the witnesses, so other Senators have their preferred lines of questioning.

Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., the chairman, tries to bring out the constitutional implications of the Watergate affair. Senator Weicker, a Connecticut Republican, is most interested in the Nixon Administration's internal security operations. Senator Edward J. Gurney, Republican of Florida, concentrates on what each witness told and was told by President Nixon.

Financial Manipulations

Senator Talmadge, a Georgia Democrat, seems fascinated by the financial manipulations in the Watergate case.

Senator Joseph M. Montoya, Democrat of New Mexico, acknowledges that he has had problems in his questioning. He enters the hearing room each day with a prepared set of questions and appears to ask each one of them, regardless of whether they have been asked by another Senator and regardless of the witness's answers.

Senator Montoya has told associates that much of his problem has been caused by his lack of staff assistance.

At one of the early committee meetings, Senator Inouye, a Hawaii Democrat, recommended that each Senator be assigned a committee staff member to work directly with him. Senator Ervin rejected the suggestion, arguing that the staff would be available to all the Senators on the committee.

In fact, that has not happened. The Senators, other than Mr. Ervin and Mr. Baker, the ranking Republican, complain privately that they have enormous difficulty obtaining information from the committee staff, that the staff seldom volunteers material and that they have been required to tax their own staffs to fill the void.

In the case of Senator Montoya, the committee recently assigned one of its own consultants—Jed Johnson, a young former Representative from Oklahoma—to work full time with him. But Mr. Johnson, despite his experience and ability, is not a lawyer, and that has posed some difficulties for the New Mexico Senator.

Assistant Helps Inouye

Senator Inouye has no such help from the committee's staff. But he has placed Eiler Ravnholt, his experienced administrative assistant, on full-time Watergate duty. By all accounts, Mr. Ravnholt has performed creditably.

Last night, Mr. Ravnholt stayed at his office until nearly midnight preparing a list of questions for Mr. Inouye to ask when he began today's interrogation of Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Inouye did ask the first four or five sets of questions that Mr. Ravnholt had drafted. But then, on the basis of Mr. Mitchell's answers, he discarded the rest of the prepared questions and began a different line of inquiry on his own.