

Ervin Committee Exhausted, Infighting Erupts

Concerned Public Is Becoming Bored

WASHINGTON — (CST) — The work of the Senate Watergate Committee is becoming impaired by weeks of four hours sleep a night, bitter behind-the-scenes infighting, fear that the public is bored or hostile and excessive concern with television images and President Nixon's tape recordings, interviews with staff members and Senators indicate.

One incident is illustrative: the sudden, ill-prepared introduction last week of an explosive 1972 memo by former White House aide Charles Colson linking Nixon personally to the ITT scandal.

Bombshell

The bombshell memo was turned up by committee investigators in an interview Tuesday night, and they urged chief counsel Samuel Dash to save it for careful use in questioning other witnesses and stalking the truth.

Instead, Dash dropped it into the public record the next afternoon during questioning of former White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman, its original recipient, without first drawing Haldeman into any discussion of the ITT case.

Dash did not tell senators on the committee about the memo in advance for fear that word of it would become public.

"It was a terrible mistake," said one staff member. "The memo should have been used during Colson's testimony, not Haldeman's, and after we'd used it to explore the ITT matter thoroughly."

Exhausted

"But Dash felt beaten by Haldeman and insisted on letting it out immediately. At that, he should have asked 30 or 40 questions, but like the rest of us, he's exhausted."

According to one aide, Dash had stayed up every night until 4 or 4:30 in the morning preparing for Haldeman.

"I've done some all-nighters around here, too, and the next day I've had to cancel interviews because I'm barely coherent," the aide said.

Introduction of the Colson memo immediately set off one of several partisan clashes that have increasingly beset the formerly placid committee.

Sen. Edward Gurney (R-Fla.) demanded to know why he had not seen the document previously. Dash replied it had just come to his attention.

The memo also reopened the issue of when Colson should appear as a witness — immediately, as Republicans Gurney and Howard Baker Jr. of Tennessee wanted, or after the August vacation, as the Democratic majority finally ruled.

Ostensibly, the Democrats' case was that Colson's appearance would delay adjournment of a worn-out committee and that his role in 1972 election activities fell into Phase II, the "dirty tricks" portion of the committee's work, rather than Phase I, the Watergate break-in and coverup.

Actually, there was more to it than that.

Timing

The Democrats knew that Colson is an articulate, combative, resourceful witness who would come in with a lengthy statement defending the President and throw armfuls of chaff in the air that would have to be examined and discarded before the main body of Colson's knowledge could be explored.

The democrats know that to interrogate Colson right would have taken at least a week and possibly more. They did not get into it because they fear that the Watergate committee is nearing the end of its welcome as a daily guest in American living rooms.

That is why Baker and Gurney argued for Colson's immediate appearance. They were aware that the mail and some polls have

begun to show erosion in the committee's standing with the country. A committee Democrat said, "the mail's running seven-to-two with us, still, but another month of straight hearings would help the President turn it around."

The partisanship that has emerged on the surface is matched and raised in executive session and in private comments of committee members and staff.

Democrats — now including committee Chairman Sam Ervin Jr., it is reliably reported — operate on the assumption that Nixon was party to the Watergate coverup and that, in fact, the coverup is continuing to the present moment.

Republicans on the committee, either because they sense swelling Democratic partisanship or because they fear that evidence is beginning to embarrass the President, have become more combative and defensive.

Baker and minority counsel Fred D. Thompson have taken to snapping at Dash and weaving logical cases for presidential innocence.