

Television and the Watergate Hearings

Now that the Congress is back and television viewers have returned from their vacations, the debate among network executives over whether to continue live coverage of the Senate Watergate committee hearings will begin in earnest. The committee itself seems steadfast in its determination to continue with public, as distinct from closed, hearings. But the networks are evidently waiting to see the fall line-up of witnesses before they make any final decisions. In our view, however, the nature of the witness list should not be the determining factor. Rather, the issues still to be examined in these hearings should be decisive.

There will probably be little problem for the networks in deciding whether to cover the final stages of phase one of the hearings; that portion concerned with the burglary and the coverup. With Charles Colson still to come, significant insights as well as high drama can be reasonably expected. High drama to the side, however, the basic purpose of the committee, as stated in the resolution creating it is to determine whether new legislation is desirable "to safeguard the electoral process by which the President of the United States is chosen."

That is precisely the heart of the matter, it seems to us, and a full exploration of the facts and the issues leading to such a determination is not "wallowing in Watergate" but taking care of about as important an aspect of the people's business as there is. Enough facts are already in the public domain to prove conclusively that severe damage was done to the electoral process last fall. The questions remaining are how much damage was done, how it was done, how it was financed and how can a recurrence be prevented?

The next two phases, investigations into political espionage and campaign financing, are likely to tell us a good deal more about those questions than even phase one did. They also go more nearly to the heart of the committee's legislative purpose. There are already laws against burglary and obstruction of justice on the books, but the area of political espionage is largely uncharted and legislative restrictions on campaign financing, despite recent revisions, are still clearly inadequate.

Evidence abounds that big money in politics corrodes almost absolutely. It is not yet clear *precisely* what should be done about it. We do know that there was a lot of money stuffed into suitcases and streaked by private jet and other means to the headquarters of Mr. Nixon's re-election committee. We know from some confessions that a number of substantial illegal gifts of corporate funds were made. We know that in some of those cases the corporate executives thought they were buying something.

The latest example of a man who thought a large donation would bring a return is George M. Steinbrenner III, chairman of the American Shipbuilding Company, who claims that he thought the contribution he made would be substantial enough to gain the ear of the White House for civic projects in Cleveland. Mr. Steinbrenner denies that there was anything illegal about his gift, but

he admits that he didn't get what he wanted. "I was told it would be a good size donation," he said, "but all of a sudden it was a peanut. I got taken. I went in with my eyes open, but I got taken." Who else got taken, how and how much the public as a whole was both taken and injured by this process is still to be explored.

There are many among the televiewing public who contributed \$2 to \$10 to the candidate of their choice. They thought they were buying nothing more than a mere effective campaign by their man. Their opinions about reform and their notions of what kind of reform to support could not help but be illuminated by sworn televised testimony both from corporate executives who caused five and six figure donations to be made and from the men who solicited such donations.

Political espionage presents less concrete, but no less important, issues. The excuse, "everybody's done it," will not suffice. What is the difference between a prank and a dirty trick? Is the planting of a derisive poster written in Chinese to be weighed on the same scale as a forged letter, a fraudulent mailing, the passing of purloined documents or the collection of information by placing illegal wiretaps in someone's headquarters? What precisely is the line between a mere prank and a pattern of conduct designed to make the voters' capacity to choose considerably more apparent than real? In a word, how much tampering with America's most important political process are the people willing to accept?

In this context there is the monumental issue of wiretapping. The Nixon administration seems to be obsessed with secrets—its own and everybody else's. Few would contest the legitimacy of true national security taps authorized to protect the very life of the nation. Most would condemn taps placed for domestic vengeance or for political skulduggery. The administration's preoccupation with secrecy and its fascination with the marvels of electronic technology seem to have utterly obliterated a fairly obvious line between legitimate and frivolous or corrupt use of eavesdropping techniques. Privacy, though increasingly more difficult to achieve, is still profoundly valued in this country. And though security is equally valued, the whole notion of its importance has been undermined by the squalid political invasions committed in its name. The subject requires the most glaring public exposure if adequate safeguards are to be developed and if the words "national security" are to be restored to their natural and reasonable meanings. How else can public opinion be brought to bear upon legislators of both parties who may be reluctant to write new restraints upon themselves?

In essence then, there remains much crucial public business for the committee to do. Only an informed people can effectively govern itself and intelligently support reforms designed to protect its most sacred public process. The networks, in conjunction with the committee, have performed an enormous public educational service so far. The rotating coverage has been eminently sensible and fair. The practice should be continued until the hearings are concluded.