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It's Watergate Time On Television Again

By Patrick J. Sloyan

Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — It starts at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning — Pacific Daylight Time. Mrs. Edward Cunningham will flick on her television set in the Bay Area and turn to Channel 7 — of the American Broadcasting Company network — and watch with millions of other Americans as Sen. Sam Ervin strides into the ornate Senate caucus room to open the fall season of "Watergate."

"It's fascinating," said Mrs. Cunningham, who has not missed a witness during her dawn patrol of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities. "I wouldn't miss a moment."

But Watergate's return represents a setback for President Nixon.

The President's representatives on Capitol Hill and a number of GOP senators waged an intensive fight to keep the hearings off television.

"The committee would not accept a ban on TV," said one White House aide. "And that's bad because they're really eating this up out there in the sticks."

Mrs. Cunningham agrees. "It's like eating peanuts — you can't stop."

So far, ABC, CBS and NBC have decided on live coverage — rotating between networks daily — for only one full week. The coming week will complete Phase I of the investigation involving the planning, execution and coverup of the burglary of Democratic National Headquarters June 17, 1972.

The first witness tomorrow will be E. Howard Hunt, a soldier of misfortune now serving a prison sentence for his involvement in the Watergate break-in.

Hunt, a veteran of the CIA and the Bay of Pigs fiasco, pleaded guilty and had little to say during the Watergate trial.

Following Hunt will be another Nixon aide, Patrick Buchanan. Buchanan prepares daily summaries of newspaper and television reports, replete with notes on which way the news appears to be slanted.

According to committee investigators, Buchanan planned strategies for weakening the effort of Sen. Edmund Muskie to win the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972. However, "it does not appear that he was involved in any of the actual 'dirty tricks,'" one Senate committee aide said.

The following week, Ervin and co-chairman Howard Baker (Rep-Tenn.), plan Phase II of the probe called "dirty tricks." Involved are stunts, gimmicks, publications and other tactics by Democratic candidates and President Nixon in 1972.

According to network officials, a decision will be made late next week on whether to continue live coverage.

With John Dean at the top of the list, there is no doubt that Watergate witnesses have seriously damaged Nixon's standings in the popularity polls.

As the committee had made clear — and Nixon has acknowledged — the Senate investigation focuses on the President's own possible criminality.

"Four four months to have the President by innuendo, by leadk, by frankly, leers and sneers of commentators, attacked in every way" has resulted in confidence ebbing, Nixon said.

The President made the comment at his second post-Watergate news conference that some observers say marks his "comeback" and a return of confidence in the White House.

Arguing against that viewpoint is the continuing legal turmoil over tape recordings of a conversation between Nixon and the man now blamed for the White House coverup of Watergate, Dean.

Confusing any recovery effort also is the furor over Vice President Spiro Agnew's trouble with the law in Baltimore.

Worse yet, is live, in color, return of Watergate.

"We knew of the lobbying effort against televising the hearings on the Hill," one network news official said. "But there was no angry call from the White House or any pressure I could see on the networks."

Just how bored most Americans are with Watergate will be known after the daytime network ratings are in next week.

According to "Broadcasting" magazine, 85 percent of the nation has watched some Watergate coverage. The trade magazine reported a study showing 36 percent of the persons interviewed had watched between one and 14 days and 34 percent had watched at least 10 days of the hearings.

The same study showed 48 percent of those interviewed favored continued coverage while 47 percent said they were "fed up" with Watergate.

"Broadcasting" also reported that the average Watergate audience was at least 12 percent more than those for "As The World Turns" and other soap operas.



E. Howard Hunt, the one-time CIA agent and part-time tyro author of (of some 40 pulp novels), apparently will talk publicly about his role in the Watergate bugging for the first time when the Senate committee re-opens its hearings tomorrow morning.