

# Senate Inquiry's Uncertain Future: Panel Viewed as 'Treading Watergate' for the Moment

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 28—It flashed suddenly and brilliantly onto the nation's television screens six months ago, but now the Senate Watergate Committee is fading from sight like a comet on an awesome yet brief circuit across the night sky.

The eager tourists who lined up outside the Senate Caucus Room have long since abandoned the Watergate hearings. The scaffolding outside the hearing room is bare of once-omnipresent television cameras. Potential witnesses have pleaded Fifth Amendment rights to refuse to answer questions and have gone to court to block private interrogation by the Senate panel's staff.

And Senators Sam J. Ervin Jr. of North Carolina, Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee and their five committee colleagues decided yesterday, after weeks of sporadic appearances at occasional hearings, to suspend

the public Watergate hearings until January.

Some are not so sure that the hearings will ever resume or that, if they do, they will produce evidence of financial misdeeds by the Nixon Administration that the Watergate committee has thus far been unable to find. The Senators suspended one of their best investigators, Scott Armstrong, last week after concluding that he had been more candid than they liked in discussing partisan bickering within the committee staff.

And the public attention to the Watergate spectacle has shifted to other forums—to the courtroom of United States District Judge John J. Sirica with tapes that buzz and recordings of President Nixon's lunch menu; to the House Judiciary Committee, which is preparing to use the Senate Watergate Panel's files to help determine whether the President should be impeached, and to the White House itself and its attempt to reverse a downturn in public confidence that has dropped five times as far as the setting on a householder's thermostat.

Samuel Dash, the chief counsel, insisted today that the

Watergate committee would not quit without first exploring the possibility of wrongdoing in the \$100,100 campaign gift from Howard R. Hughes that C. G. Rebozo, Mr. Nixon's close friend, contends he kept locked in a bank vault for three years, and the allegation that the Nixon Administration traded a 1971 increase in Government milk price supports for a pledge of 1974 campaign donations from milk producers.

## 'Full of Vim and Vigor'

"It's here, it's thriving, it's full of vim and vigor," Mr. Dash said of the committee. "I can say on oath that we will have public hearings in January and they will be substantial."

A colleague of Mr. Dash said privately, however, that the committee was merely "treading Watergate" until the Senators composed their final report on the investigation. It seemed likely, moreover, that the Watergate Senators had already achieved their most ambitious goal—awakening the nation to the scope of the scandal.

Last May, when the Water-

gate hearings began, the Gallup Poll found Mr. Nixon's public approval rating to be 59 per cent.

In the months that followed, the Watergate witnesses—John W. Dean 3d, the former White House legal counsel; John N. Mitchell, the former Attorney General; H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, the former senior members of the President's staff, and others caught up in the scandal—gave millions of viewers an oppor-

tunity to make their own judgments about the characters in a running television drama.

It was to the Watergate Senators and their audience, on July 17, that a former Nixon assistant, Alexander P. Butterfield, reluctantly disclosed the White House tape recording system. By the time the Senate hearings lapsed into something approaching the commonplace this month, Mr. Nixon's support in the Gallup ratings had plummeted to 27 per cent.

As Mr. Dash stated it, the public's "overwhelming reaction" to Mr. Nixon's dismissal of Archibald Cox as special Watergate prosecutor last month was a direct consequence of the political atmosphere generated by the Senate hearings. Had the televised inquiry not "readied the public," he said, the dispute over White House tapes and documents that culminated in the ouster of Mr. Cox "would have looked like just another

Washington shenanigan."

Instead, the Cox dismissal prompted 40 resolutions of impeachment now confronting the House Judiciary Committee and apparently led to Mr. Nixon's decision to give up the Watergate tapes.

When the Senate panel returned in September from the Watergate burglary and cover-up to political sabotage and financing, it set and then abandoned deadlines of Oct. 15 and Nov. 21 for completion

of public hearings. Now the committee intends to wrap them up by February.

Meantime, the committee must prepare a comprehensive report to the full Senate. It is expected to be relatively bland—but with each of the four Democrats and three Republicans adding more lively separate views. By the time it becomes public, it is likely to be as anticlimatic as the vague memory of a comet's tail.