

THE SENATE Watergate committee acted prudently and properly in agreeing to postpone its hearings on the Hughes money and the milk money in order to avoid any possibility of prejudicing the trial of former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former Commerce Secretary Maurice H. Stans. The issue of pretrial publicity in connection with the committee's work has been raised vaguely and unpersuasively before. This time the potential conflict is specific and short-term, since the Mitchell-Stans trial is scheduled to begin in New York later this month. The federal prosecutors in that case asked Chairman Sam Ervin not to cancel the hearings, but simply to hold off until a jury has been empanelled and sequestered. It was a reasonable request, as the committee recognized.

This turn of events, on top of the Senate committee's earlier 4-3 vote in favor of holding new hearings, shows what a difference the past eight months have made. When the Ervin committee first faced the cameras last May, it was the only show in town. The panel was united and determined to dig out the facts—and certainly no other kind of inquiry could have done that essential work as fully or dramatically. Now, however, the momentum has moved on from fact-finding toward the prosecutorial and judicial stage, and other efforts—the trial in New York, the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment probe, the work of the special prosecutor and the grand juries—have gained priority. Now, too, the Watergate committee seems to have lost much of its initial vigor and harmony, to the point that only its staff seemed to have real enthusiasm for returning to the caucus room at all.

This is not to say that no further hearings should be held. Granted, a great deal has already been said about the milk lobby's largesse and about the \$100,000 which went from Howard Hughes to Charles G. Rebozo and then, three years later, back to Mr. Hughes again. But all we know simply points up the crucial things we don't yet know about these two sets of transactions, the under-

standings which may have accompanied the cash, and the extent to which these large political payments influenced official policies improperly. In each case, there is also a specific version of Sen. Howard Baker's famous question: What did the President know and when did he know it?

Public, sworn testimony by several individuals could be especially helpful in untangling the complicated dealings and relationships involving Mr. Hughes, several of his emissaries and erstwhile agents, Mr. Rebozo, Mr. Nixon, and a supporting cast which seems to include, among others, Mr. Mitchell, Donald Nixon, G. Gordon Liddy, and Hank Greenspun, publisher of the Las Vegas Sun. A full explication of such tangled matters by the Watergate committee might be too much to expect. But careful, compact public hearings could at least dispel some of the clouds of mystery and shed new light on the strange, secret and extra-legal ways in which money, power and influence have operated during recent years. The Watergate committee's mandate from the Senate, after all, is not just to pin down the nature and scope of the President's own involvement in all of this, but more generally to learn how so many things and people went so drastically wrong en route to the 1972 election.

There is, of course, a point at which fact-finding has to stop, a point at which the panel's record—so voluminous and yet so incomplete—must be transmuted into a report. Some members of the committee, perhaps most of them, seem to believe that point has already been reached. Their judgments may be colored by weariness, political discomfiture or a sense of diminishing political returns. But it is true that Watergate has neared the time of summing-up. The real issue facing the seven Senators now is not what more they learn, but what they will conclude and recommend publicly—and what they may also wish to pass along in confidence to the prosecutors and the House Judiciary Committee. In this respect, the most challenging part of their job has just begun.