

# The Senate Watergate Committee Should Retire

Like Johnny Unitas, the Senate Watergate Committee is having trouble retiring gracefully. Unlike the great quarterback, whose achievements were spectacular, the committee can ruin its standing in history if it goes on too long.

That is one reason why the committee should not hold more hearings.

As it is, this depressing fact is worth remarking: the disarray of the Nixon White House has been almost matched recently by the disarray of its first tormentor, the committee.

This is not entirely the committee's fault. From the beginning the committee members were in an untenable position dealing with an unmanageable maelstrom of events. They were seven legislators doing a detective's job, for which they were not equipped by temperament, skills, or mandate.

It was like an inquiry convened on the deck of the Titanic midway through the disaster itself. When the committee was appointed a year ago, it did not even know about many of the most significant matters it soon would be examining.

The "plumbers," the Ellsberg breakthrough, the enemies list, the Huston plan for illegal wiretapping and other acts, the destruction of evidence by the acting director of the F.B.I.—these were not public knowledge last February, and most of them became public knowledge without any assistance from the committee.

Actually, it is fortunate that the nation did not have to rely on the committee to uncover these matters.

From the first hours the questioning by the committee members was alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) repetitive and imprecise. That the committee got so much useful in-

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formation on the record is less a tribute to the skill of the committee than it is evidence of just how rapidly the Watergate cover-up was collapsing of its own weight.

H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and John Dean were blown out of the White House before the committee held a public meeting. The committee was a useful forum for Dean. But Dean, like all the major witnesses, controlled the hearings from the witness table. He said what he wanted to say, no more and no less. Had he not said it there, he probably would have found it expedient—and possible—to get his

version of events on the public record some other way.

The committee's big discovery—the most important piece of information that a witness did not want to give—was Alexander Butterfield's report about the existence of a White House taping system. This discovery may have changed the course of history, but it was the result of tenacity by several very junior staff members, not the committee as a whole.

When the major witnesses had said what they wanted to say, the committee was left with the chore of holding informative hearings on lesser matters, like violations of the campaign finance laws. It failed, and came unglued.

The staff fell to bickering. Communication between the staff and the senators collapsed. The disastrous scatter-shot subpoena for 500 White House tapes and documents went out without the knowledge, much less the consent, of the committee's vice chairman Howard Baker. Chairman Sam Erwin authorized the subpoena without carefully examining it.

Senators are terribly busy men. They must give vast grants of discretion to their staffs. The senior staff of this committee, and especially the chief counsel, Sam Dash, did not use this discretion well. By now the senators are properly uneasy about the way the staff has had the committee blundering about near the dangerous shoals of criminal investigations.

Last May the committee was asking this question: Does Watergate demonstrate the need for new legislation?

By June the committee found itself grappling with this question: What did the President know and when did he know it?

But today the committee—or at least Mr. Dash—seems unhealthily interested in this question: How can we get back on television?

This accounts for much of the staff enthusiasm for hearings concerning the \$100,000 sent from Howard Hughes to Mr. Nixon's friend Charles "Bebe" Rebozo, and concerning the connection between the dairy industry's campaign contributions and the administrator's decision to increase a dairy subsidy.

Obviously the Special Prosecutor and the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment investigation can cope with these matters. But some staffers on the Senate side want hearings as an excuse to subpoena Rebozo and, better still, former Treasury Secretary John Connally, who is reported to have knowledge about the subsidy decision. The networks might bring the cameras back for these birds of paradise.

This is a base and dangerous excuse for a Senate hearing. It does no service to what remains of the committee's good name.

Last summer the committee was a fireball in the night. But we are in the cold dawn, the people are aroused, and the bell can quit clanging.