

Famous Brown Satchel Finds Its Way up to Capitol Hill

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Surrounded by police and press fanfare, the famous brown satchel finally traveled up to Capitol Hill yesterday, where House impeachment investigators will at last learn what the Watergate grand jury said about President Nixon.

The briefcase left the federal courthouse in the firm grip of John Doar, chief counsel for the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry, just 26 days after the Watergate grand jury turned over its secret report to Judge John J. Sirica.

What might have been a routine transaction took on the trappings of a celebrated event, with police guards, a swarm of cameramen and reporters and spectators, because the small suitcase could have historic consequences. It contains the grand jury's compilation of evidence on President Nixon and the so-called Watergate cover-up—the central event under scrutiny by the House committee.

Judge Sirica, one of the few people outside the grand jury who had actually seen what's inside the bag, kept it in his office safe for the past month while Watergate defense lawyers unsuccessfully argued against its delivery to the House investigators. When their appeal deadline passed Monday, Judge Sirica arranged for yesterday's transfer.

When it was done, safely handed over from the judicial branch to the legislative branch, Sirica announced to reporters: "As far as the court is concerned, the transaction is completed.

Doar and the Judiciary Committee's minority counsel, Albert Jenner, arrived at the judge's chambers on the second floor of the U. S. courthouse shortly after 9:30 a.m., but it was more than two hours later when they left with the suitcase.

In the privacy of an adjoining jury room, Sirica listened first to Doar as he

read a letter from Judiciary Committee Chairman Peter W. Rodino authorizing the two men to accept the package.

Then the three men unlocked the dark brown satchel and spent two hours going over its contents, just to make sure everything was there. Except for a brief overnight visit to the U.S. Court of Appeals, the bag has been under Sirica's care.

"All of the time," the judge said later, "was spent checking very carefully all the items that were in the briefcase when it was turned over to me by the foreman of the grand jury on March 1. We have a receipt for all of the items."

Based on the limited public discussion of the satchel's contents, it includes an index of Watergate-related events, plus back-up testimony and documents, all pertinent, in the grand jury's judgment, to the question of whether President Nixon should be impeached. Sitting in on the inventory were Peter Kreindler, an attorney from the Watergate special prosecutor's office, and the judge's two law clerks.

When they were done, four GSA policemen arrived at the judge's door to escort the bag and the lawyers out of the courthouse. Downstairs, at the front door, the protective responsibility was passed to the Capitol Police, who serve the House and Senate.

John Doar made a stout effort to push through the crowd to his car without issuing any comments. Halfway there, he surrendered to the press of news reporters and uttered a brief situation report.

"At the instructions of Chairman Rodino," Doar reported, "Mr. Jenner and I came to the courthouse this morning to receive the material that the grand jury had requested be turned over to the House Judiciary Committee. At Judge Sirica's instruction, we went over each item to be sure that all the items were there as had been presented to the court.

"That's all the statements I am authorized to make. We are now returning to our offices with the materials," he said.

With some struggle, Doar

and his companions made it to the blue sedan, where the chief counsel got in the back seat and held the satchel on his lap. A Capitol Police cruiser blurted a warning with its siren, and eventually the cameramen backed away so the automobile could depart.

"That was an American happening," shouted an amused onlooker.

Five and a half blocks away, the satchel and its contents arrived safely home on the second floor of the old Congressional Hotel on New Jersey Avenue, the staff headquarters for the impeachment investigation.

Only four people have automatic access to it there, Doar and Jenner, Chairman Rodino and Rep. Edward Hutchinson, the ranking Republican. Other staff investigators will be granted access by Doar or Jenner only on a "need-to-know" basis.

Other congressmen will have to wait until the staff prepares its findings and recommendations. Meanwhile, the satchel was back inside a safe again, only this one belongs to the House Judiciary Committee.