

Impeachment Panel's Staff Work Lags

By Jack Anderson

With the House impeachment hearings in full swing, the mighty, 101-member staff still hasn't completed its homework.

We reported last January that the lawyers hadn't interviewed a single witness, that many staff members were assigned merely to answer routine impeachment mail and that some investigators spent their time reading newspapers and novels.

The pace picked up only slightly as the hearings approached. Not until the last few weeks have major Watergate figures been interviewed. Sources close to the investigation say the interviews have been inept and inadequate.

For instance, silent, stoic G. Gordon Liddy, the mastermind of the Watergate break-in, recently was ushered into the committee headquarters in handcuffs.

As he entered the long, sterile hallway, Liddy was directed to sign the log book. True to form, he refused to write his name until his lawyer persuaded him to relent. The only information Liddy gave the investigators was his signature accompanied by a note to the effect he had signed "only on advice of counsel and under duress."

His co-conspirator, E. Howard Hunt, who demanded and got White House hush money, caused a stir when he appeared before committee investigators. One young aide asked Hunt to

autograph a copy of one of his spy novels. Hunt noted that the book was stamped the property of the Library of Congress. The staff member pleaded with him to sign anyway, and Hunt grudgingly gave his autograph.

When the staff hauled in the President's personal attorney, Herbert Kalmbach, the atmosphere again was more that of a carnival than a serious inquiry. Kalmbach's presence caused so much excitement that the interview was constantly interrupted by committee employees entering and leaving the room.

Other Watergate figures, such as Jeb Magruder and Judge Matthew Byrne, have been interviewed. But the investigators still haven't gotten around to some key witnesses. For example, aerosol valve king Robert Abplanalp, a presidential crony and financial benefactor, hasn't appeared before the staff.

But the poor preparation probably won't prevent impeachment. The Members of Congress are political weather-vanes, and the winds of impeachment have shifted against the President. A reluctant Congress, it now appears, may be forced by an angry nation to impeach the President.

Political Football—Among the confidential documents that the Watergate investigators have now obtained from the White House is a report on an amazing scheme to recruit pro football stars for President Nixon's 1972 campaign team.

The President's political aides tried to get the football heroes, who had recorded anti-drug commercials, to do political commercials for Mr. Nixon.

"The Great Fumble," as the play might be called, was literally halted at the White House gates. The story is told in a confidential campaign memo from Herbert Porter to his boss, deputy campaign chief Jeb Magruder.

The political image makers had been building up Nixon as the nation's No. 1 football fan. Porter on the eve of the 1972 campaign "instructed Bill Minshall to put together a plan on how to build a list of sports celebrities and athletes who might support the President."

Young Minshall, a campaign aide and son of Rep. William Minshall (R-Ohio), "in his eagerness to get a job done," decided to line up football stars who had volunteered to appear on anti-drug TV spots.

"Minshall . . . felt that the football players participating in the televised Drug Abuse Program would be the logical persons to add to the list" . . . wrote Porter. "He telephoned the offices of Commissioner Pete Rozelle . . . (to get) the names of the players participating in drug abuse commercials."

The word got back to the White House's Bill Rhatican, who had labored to keep the anti-drug commercials tough,

effective and, above all, nonpolitical. He angrily called up Nixon campaign headquarters and roared: "Keep your (expletive deleted) hands out of this thing!"

Porter backed down and wrote Rhatican a note of apology, blaming it all on "an 'over-zealous' staff member." But this didn't cool the zeal of the campaign aides. Early in 1972, they learned that President Nixon was holding a reception for the athletes who had made the TV spots.

The campaign aides rushed the two blocks to the White House gates and sought admission. Their plan was to button-hole the athletes right under the President's nose and sign them to work on the Nixon campaign.

But once again, Rhatican intervened. He personally notified the White House guards not to clear the campaign officials through the White House gates. Only after they swore they would not try to proselyte the football stars were the aides finally admitted.

Footnote: A National Football League spokesman said the league strictly avoided any pressure on players to support candidates. Minshall, now working in New York, refused all comment. Rhatican confirmed the basic accuracy of the Porter memo. Porter was in prison on Watergate-related charges and could not be reached.