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When Representative John F. Seiberling emerged the other afternoon from a long, closed hearing of the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry, the inevitable horde of reporters surrounded him, pressing to find out what had happened.

Mr. Seiberling, an Ohio Democrat, was not unprepared. He had learned, he divulged soberly, that the plastic model of the United States Seal—the fierce eagle—adorning a wall of the hearing room contained 13 stars, 13 stripes, 13 arrows, a branch with 13 olives and, oddly enough, only nine tail feathers.

What, wondered one journalist, about the eagle's trailing-edge feathers?

"Forty-six," shot back the well-informed source without hesitation.

It was, of course, a parody, understood and enjoyed on both sides, of what has become a bizarre and ungainly impeachment ritual—the daily oral struggle between members of Congress sworn to secrecy about the investigation of President Nixon's conduct and reporters committed to harrying out the details of what has happened behind the closed, guarded doors of the Judiciary Committee.

Each time the 21 Democrats and 17 Republicans on the panel recess the closed hearings, for their lunch break or to answer the electric buzzes summoning them to the House floor for a vote, two or three times as many reporters pounce on the stream of Representatives to pan for small nuggets of knowledge about a monumental proceeding.

A Representative will leave the hearing room and begin striding down a long corridor of the Rayburn House Office Building toward the privacy of an elevator marked, "Members Only."

A pack containing a score or more yipping reporters, some walking backward, others pushing miniature tape recorders over the shoulders of colleagues and into the Representative's face, will form a flying wedge that sweeps the broad corridor free of startled tourist.

The result, usually, will be information less like a nugget than a grain of sand: the time, or subject, of the next hearing; confirmation that a sensitive matter was raised; a vague description of the topic of the recessed hearing.

Sometimes a genuine piece of news will survive the movable famine: a Representative's characterization of the strength or weakness of evidence bearing on the Presi-

dent's conduct; a recollection, occasionally even a scrawled note, about the content of an important passage of a White House tape recording.

It is haphazard, unsatisfactory and, to both Representatives and newsmen, more than a little demeaning. But the ritual continues. It is one of the few methods to obtain even the barest knowledge about a proceeding that could influence the course of the nation's future.

One day last week, Albert E. Jenner Jr., the Judiciary Committee's Republican impeachment counsel, was cornered for a few minutes in a hallway. He parried substantive interrogation more successfully than he has on other occasions.

The reporters lapsed into banter with the lawyer. Was Mr. Jenner, a successful trial lawyer from Chicago, making a handsome income from impeachment?

He received, he said, \$135 a day plus a \$35 living allowance. His room at the Madison Hotel cost \$45 a day. He looked forward to returning to Chicago every Friday night "to get a good meal and a good rest on a hard mattress."

But he must return to Washington late Saturday to be prepared for a staff meeting that begins at 9 o'clock, every Sunday morning.

Someone asked about Mr. Jenner's affinity for bow ties. He disclosed that he owned about 500—"You never throw a tie away"—and then demonstrated how to tie them.

Later, a journalist who had been absent during the encounter with Mr. Jenner asked a colleague if he had learned anything new.

"Yes," the colleague said. "Bert Jenner has 500 bow ties."

Two-thirds of the South Capitol Street vestibule of the Rayburn Building has been transformed into a miniature television studio. Networks maintain live and videotape cameras there for interviews with Judiciary Committee members of the President's defense counsel. James D. St. Clair.

The location is strategic, along the path most committee members take to and from the impeachment hearing room.

The other day Representative Hamilton Fish Jr., a Republican from upstate New York, grabbed the arm of Sam Donaldson, a correspondent of the American Broadcasting Companies, and, pointing to the cameras and floodlight, pretended to complain:

"Don't you know you're making me self-conscious? I only have one summer suit.

Why do I have my picture taken every day? I had to ask my daughter to sew a button on this coat so I would have on a different suit this morning."

Some members avoided the interview by departing the hearing room through a private escape route—into the committee's law library, down a closed corridor alongside committee offices and out a door only a short sprint from an elevator in a secluded corner of the building.

One reason why there have been fewer leaks of sensitive information from the Judiciary Committee is that John M. Doar, the panel's special counsel on impeachment, is a bug, so to speak, on security.

Every night, after a hearing, the committee room is "swept" electronically to be certain that eavesdropping devices have not been hidden there. Two aides to Mr. Doar gather up all documents in the room, place the papers on a warehouseman's cart, and, accompanied by an armed policeman, take the documents to the inquiry staff's offices.

The offices, sealed from intruders by armed guards, are on the second floor of what is now called the House Office Building Annex but was until last year, an ancient hostelry called the Congressional Hotel. One thing the offices did not lack was bathrooms. "Two to an office," Mr. Jenner quipped.

But until Mr. Doar took over the second floor, the old Congressional Hotel did lack sufficient security. From what Danny Wise, the House locksmith, told a reporter, the impeachment inquiry locks are a continuing problem.

"Don't talk to me about the second floor," Mr. Wise said, with a mock grimace.

When Mr. Doar moved in, Mr. Wise had to install or change the lock on every desk, every closet, every door. The locks, the locksmith said, are temperamental and "something is always going wrong over there."

One room—presumably the central storage area for inquiry evidence—not only has a number of safes in it, but also a doublelock system

on the door. One key must be used to enter the room, a second key to leave it.

Whether out of precaution or paranoia, committee members also have become security-sensitive. A newsman and an aide to the chairman, Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr., Democrat of New Jersey, were talking on the telephone Friday when they

heard clicks and an unusual amount of static.

"We'll have to have the phone checked—again," the aide said.

Representative William L. Hungate, Democrat of Missouri, decided a few weeks ago to have the combination changed on the safe where he kept his confidential inquiry materials. Mr. Wise

changed the combination so that only Mr. Hungate would know it. Next day Mr. Hungate could not get the safe open.

Impeachment secretiveness seems to bother everyone concerned, but a certain wry tolerance has settled in.

Mr. St. Clair and the White House have urged that the hearings be held in public and have deplored the cases in which sensitive evidence has trickled into public view. When a confidential committee memorandum was leaked last week, however, Larry Speakes, a press aide to Mr. St. Clair, saw reporters examining a copy and said, "We'd like to have it too."

So a West Coast newsman "leaked" the committee document to the White House.

For their part, the journalists bemoan an arrangement under which they must stand for long periods on the marble Rayburn floors—the small of the back seems to suffer most—and periodically heed the admonitions of an officious Capitol police lieutenant: "Up against the wall. Make an aisle. People can't go to and fro."

William S. Vance of The Philadelphia Inquirer advises others playing this waiting game to "lurk with dignity."

And most of the 39 committee members, schooled politicians who normally thrive on publicity, are not overly fond of being followed nearly everywhere they go and hounded for information. They bear it and grin.

Last Thursday, Lawrence Taylor of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch happened to find himself on an elevator with eight members of the Judiciary Committee.

Some of the Representatives pretended to give Mr. Taylor a between-floors pummeling. Others, more subtle, perhaps, gave the correspondent a dose of his own bitter medicine.

"I know you're on your way to lunch, Mr. Taylor, but can we ask you . . ."

"I know you're on your way to the bathroom, Mr. Taylor, but could we interview you . . ."

Mr. Taylor smiled, and disclosed nothing.