

MAR 16 1976

WXPost
*Unanswered Questions in
Another Watergate Memoir*

Reviewed by
Lawrence Meyer

Book World

The reviewer is on the national staff of The Washington Post.

AT THAT POINT IN TIME: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE WATERGATE COMMITTEE. By Fred D. Thompson.

In February 1973, Fred D. Thompson was a relatively unknown lawyer beginning the private practice of law in Nashville after a three-year stint as an assistant federal prosecutor. Six months later, Thompson's was one of the more familiar faces in America, along with the likes of Sam J. Ervin Jr., Howard Baker, Sam Dash and Lowell P. Weicker Jr.

Now Thompson is the first to publish the "inside story of the Senate Watergate Committee." His credentials for telling that story are clear enough: As counsel to the committee's Republican minority, he was in a position to observe events firsthand, to know who said and did what inside the committee.

Thompson might have taken any number of approaches to his task—analyzing the clash that Watergate brought on, or giving some insight into the motivations of the committee members and staff, or simply providing a more complete public record about important decisions the committee made.

He has chosen to write a memoir. One approaches his book wondering what more he has to add to the already vast lore written about the Senate committee he served for 18 months. The answer, unfortunately, is not much.

Thompson might have reassured us that the committee members in private showed a profound sense of a crisis in which they were participating. Or, he might have alarmed us with a view of crass politicians exploiting events for their own gains. Instead, he presents silhouettes and stereotypes. Chairman Ervin was a

kindly, well-meaning man with an ever-ready, funny mountain story to tell.

Vice Chairman Baker, the ranking Republican (and Thompson's patron), was a wise diplomat, avoiding confrontation with the Democratic majority while prodding Ervin and the committee to take the judicious course. Sen. Herman E. Talmadge (D-Ga.) smoked cigars, was smart, busy and let Ervin have his proxy. Republican Weicker was tall, hot-tempered and referred to himself as "the junior senator from Connecticut." And so it goes. Thompson gives a peek inside the committee but not much more.

Minor errors and omissions don't help. Thompson places Abe Fortas on the Supreme Court while he was trying, in 1964, to suppress a news story concerning one of President Johnson's aides, Walter Jenkins. Fortas, in fact, did not become an associate justice until 1965. Although appearing to give a chronological account of the testimony the committee heard in the summer of 1973, Thompson inexplicably moves up—and out of context—the testimony of White House aide Patrick J. Buchanan.

Other omissions, however, seriously diminish the book. Thompson never mentions—and thus does not explain—the committee's decision to postpone for one week John Dean's explosive public testimony in June, 1973, to avoid embarrassing President Nixon during the visit of Soviet Party Chairman Leonid I. Brezhnev.

Thompson gives only the briefest mention to the public testimony of former CIA director Richard M. Helms, even though it was that testimony, according to Baker,

which provoked him to launch his own investigation into the CIA's role in Watergate. What was it that Helms said or failed to say that provoked Baker?

Thompson expresses bewilderment that the press viewed Baker's CIA investigation with the suspicion that it was an attempt to divert attention from Nixon's role in the Watergate cover-up. Thompson could not at the time—and apparently still cannot—understand that it was Baker's failure to provide a straightforward explanation of what he was doing and why, that aroused the skepticism concerning his motives. Baker chose instead to talk in Aesopian terms about "animals crashing around in the forest" that he could hear but couldn't see. It was a colorful phrase and it made a snappy quote, but what did it mean?

Thompson chides Democrats for letting partisanship get in the way of fairness, but he fails to mention another of the sleazier chapters in the Watergate drama: then GOP chairman George Bush's charge in late July 1973 that the committee majority's chief investigator, Carmine Bellino, had recruited spies in 1960 to help defeat Nixon. A committee investigation later failed to substantiate the charges.

Leaving Washington the day Gerald Ford assumed the presidency, Thompson says he "realized that I would probably be thinking about the implications of Watergate for the rest of my life." That might be too long a wait, but he could have served history better by giving the subject more thought before putting pen to paper.