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May 17, 1973

Watergate Hearings Opening Statement

The hearings which we begin today are the most important in my 14 years in Congress.

At stake is the very integrity of the election process. Unless we can safeguard that process from broad manipulation, deception and other illegal or unethical activities, one of the most precious rights -- the right to vote -- will be left without meaning.

Democracy will have been subverted.

As I see it, our mission is two-fold: First, to thoroughly investigate all allegations of the improper activities during the 1972 presidential election so that the full truth will be known; and secondly, to take steps to prevent future recurrences of such activities.

Our effort should not be directed toward punishing the guilty -- judicial processes with that aim are under way in at least four cities -- but to initiate a national public debate on our elections and how they work or fail to work.

Like most Americans, I have been truly shocked by the revelations and allegations of this scandal, which is unparalleled in our countrys history.

More than a dozen officials have been fired or have resigned from government positions and two former Cabinet officers have been indicted.

White House officials have tried to use the nations top intelligence gathering agencies, the FBI and the CIA, for partisan political purposes to cover-up improper activities.

Scurrilous campaign literature has been distributed in the form of phony letters and naked

criticism.

Government decisions, it now appears, may have been for sale to the largest campaign contributors.

The sins of the spies and saboteurs, the manipulators and money-men, burglars and buggers must be purged from the very heart and soul of our election process.

But I must add a word of caution.

We have heard many sensational charges in the last few months and we will hear many more in the weeks ahead.

It is vital that hasty judgment not be made before we have all the facts. The country will be ill-served by another period of McCarthyism.

These hearings should enlighten and inform and provide the groundwork for a reaffirmation of faith in our American system.