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Montrealer lands prize job in Watergate probe

WASHINGTON — To the many surprises of Watergate, add one more — a young Montrealer is among those investigating the very highest levels of American government.

Steve Leopold, a 21-year-old law student at McGill University, is one of four investigators on the staff of Senator Sam Ervin's Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities.

He began working for the committee on May 17 — the day its televised hearings on the Watergate scandal got



George
Radwanski
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underway — and he has scarcely had time to catch his breath ever since.

"I start my working day at 7.15 a.m., and I finish at 10.30

or 11 at night," Leopold explained over a hasty lunch at a restaurant near the Capitol.

"I can't even remember the last time I came out of the office for lunch, there's so much that has to be done. And the funny thing is that I'm not known in school as a hard worker."

The young investigator is unable to discuss details of his work because of the need to preserve secrecy, but it is clear that his position puts him in a vantage point close to the centre of the action.

"My functions involve interviewing certain people, following up leads, studying documents — things like that," he says. "I can't be more specific, but the idea is to uncover stuff, so that when the big people come in to testify, the committee will have things to ask them about."

ENTHUSIASTIC

Leopold — who looks and sounds older than his 21 years — doesn't try to hide his excitement over the prize job he has landed. His eyes shine,

he grins enthusiastically at every question and a strain of "I-can't-believe - it's-happening-to-me" runs through his conversation.

"This is just such a fantastic opportunity," he says.

"I've always been interested in politics, and here I am working with people like Chief Investigator Carmine Bellino, who investigated Jimmy Hoffa and Wayne Bishop, the guy who broke the Valachi papers."

What's a Montreal student doing in company like that, digging along a trail that reaches into the highest echelons of the White House?

"Well," he grins, "I guess what Mr. Ervin probably had in mind was a bit of impartiality, someone coming from the outside with a fresh outlook."

"And I suppose he decided that I had already done some research," he adds, referring to an Opportunities-for-Youth-funded study of used car dealerships and a look into the oil industry he undertook two years ago.

FIRST-YEAR LAW

Leopold, who finished his first year of law school this spring and who graduated from McGill last year with an honors BA in political science,

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wrote to Senator Ervin as soon as creation of the committee was announced.

"I originally volunteered to work for the committee for free, and I got back a letter thanking me and saying they would look into it."

"Later, I wrote again and said I would be going to the U.S. anyway for the summer — I figured I had maybe a two-per-cent chance of getting the job — and then when I was in Virginia Beach I got a letter saying they would be interested in seeing me," he said.

"I started work the same day the hearings opened."

"For the first hour and a half I did secretarial work. Then a subpoena had to be signed right away and I was the closest guy available to give it to Senator Ervin."

"The hearings were just about to start when I handed

him the subpoena, and he literally handed it back to me with one hand while he banged the gavel with his other hand to open the inquiry," Leopold recalls, shaking his head in disbelief.

INVESTIGATOR

"I started the first week as staff assistant, then moved up to the title of consultant and finally became an investigator," he says.

"But I was really doing investigative work from the first day. My responsibilities have grown as the confidence of the committee in me has grown."

Leopold had originally planned to work only for the summer, then return to McGill, where this year he was elected secretary-treasurer of the Law Undergraduates Society. Now he's having second thoughts.

"I'm not so sure any



STEVE LEOPOLD

more," he says. "It's just so interesting here that I would consider taking a sabbatical year from my studies."

"I believe if you start something, you should see it through. And besides, I can always go back to McGill in a year. I can't leave the inquiry and come back to it, because it won't be around any more."

Watergate sinister, says Canadian

Of the Watergate case itself, Leopold says:

"From a historical perspective, it's probably the biggest scandal in the 20th century."

"From a political perspective, it demonstrates the volatility of politics. Just a year ago, it was the beginning of the era of the Republican Party. Everyone was talking about the southern strategy, about the tremendous power base Nixon had built."

"Now there's talk of the recommencement of a Democratic era," he says.

"It's such a sinister affair. The people closest to the highest power in the country were doing what is clearly unconstitutional," he adds, choosing his words carefully.

Leopold is aware of the implications of his job, but when he is asked the ultimate question — how would he, a Canadian, feel if his investigation uncovered the ore-

piece of evidence that could bring down the President of the United States? — he flinches.

He acknowledges the hypothetical possibility, asks to be excused from answering the question and finally thinks a long time before replying.

"Not from the point of view of a Canadian, but from the point of view of a neutral observer," he says, very slowly, "I think I'm in immediate proximity and in very close touch with this situation, and, in a sense, I'm working to see that justice be served."

"Whoever has broken the law, it's my duty to see that justice be served."

He thinks a little more, then Steve Leopold, McGill University student and U.S. Senate committee investigator, finally says:

"Whoever has broken the law, I hope I uncover it."