

The Scene in Sirica's Court: A Historic 13 Minutes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 1— At 10 A.M. today, Judge John J. Sirica was sitting in his chambers, reminiscing about his 16 years on the bench, whiling away the time until he could put a black robe over his gray suit and walk into Courtroom 2 to preside over history.

He arrived to be greeted with the shuffle of a crowd rising to its feet as a court functionary intoned ceremo-

nial phrases, ending with the prayer for the country and for "this honorable court." Some 13 minutes and surprisingly few words later, it was over.

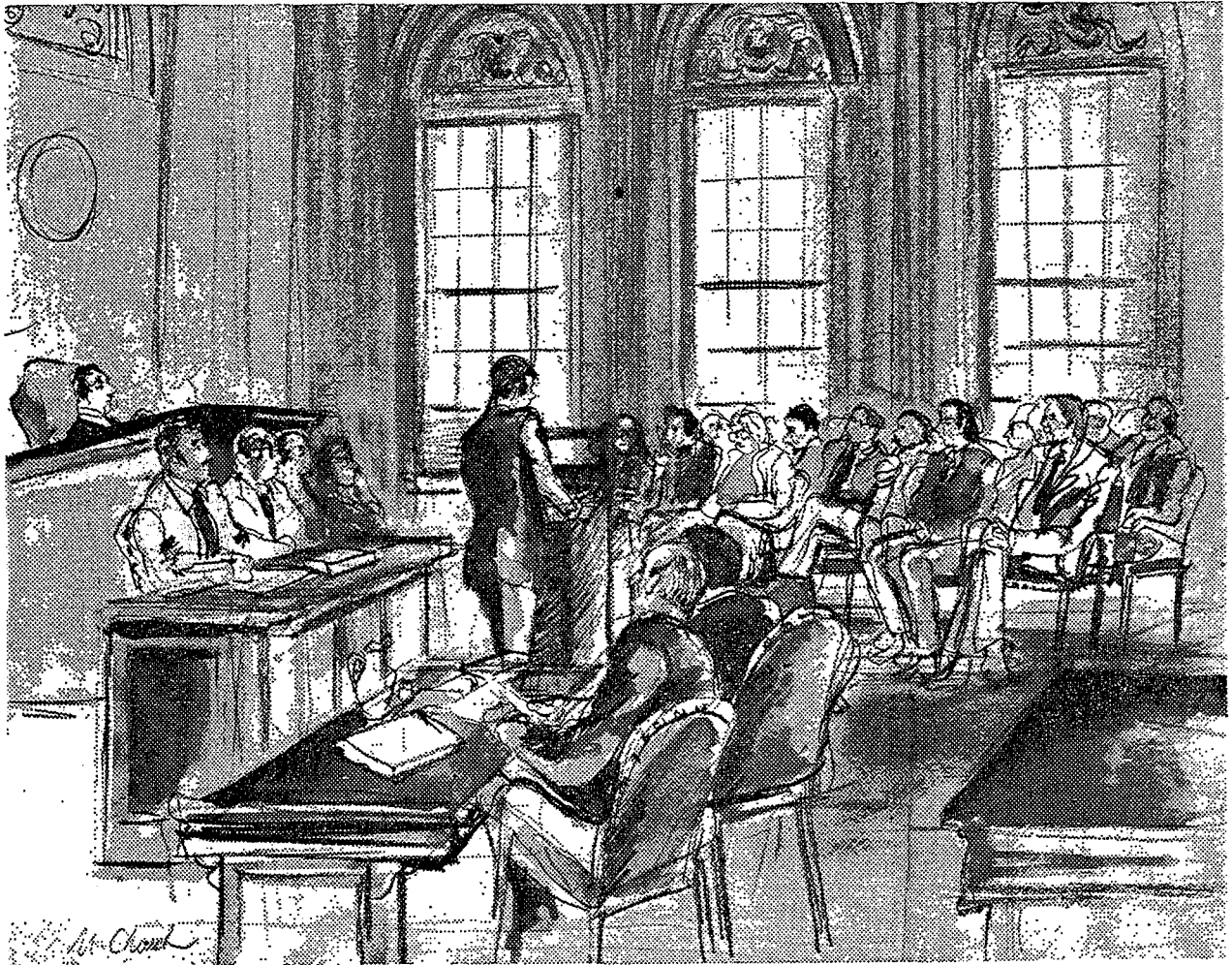
The small, wood-paneled courtroom, with a checkerboard cork floor, an American flag and seal and two maroon ceramic water pitchers as the only decorations, was filled—with lawyers, Watergate task force staff members and reporters. The long line of would-be specta-

tors that had started forming two hours before the 11 A.M. hearing was exiled to the corridor.

The prosecution's table was crowded with lawyers and papers. At the defense table, on the right side of the courtroom, sat a lone figure, Paul Murphy of the law firm of Hundley & Gacheris, representing John N. Mitchell.

The focus of attention was a group of 21 distributed

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The New York Times/Marilyn Church

Assistant U.S. Attorney James W. Rayhill, standing, making his opening statement to the jury in the trial of John N. Mitchell, seated foreground, and Maurice H. Stans. Judge Lee P. Gagliardi is at upper left.

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along the three front rows on the left side of the courtroom — nine men and 12 women, 15 blacks and six whites, the grand jury. As a group, they were no more uniform than any other random cluster. Nine wore eyeglasses, one had an afro, several women wore hats. But they were manifestly at ease with one another, having been together now for some 21 months, and they murmured and smiled mildly as they waited for the judge.

The foreman, Vladimir Pregelj, is a tall man with dark, white-streaked hair and goatee. And it was Mr. Pregelj (pronounced pray-gull) who contributed the day's only dash of drama. After Mr. Jaworski, a Texan plump and at ease in his double-breasted blue suit, had informed Judge Sirica that the grand jury had material "to be delivered to y'all," Mr. Pregelj rose from his front-row seat and walked toward the bench.

He carried a large, old-fashioned black briefcase, the sort with accordion folds at the bottom and a carrying handle at the top. It contained, he said, "one indictment and one report that is sealed," and he handed it up to the judge.

There was silence in the courtroom except for the inevitable rustles, so that the sound of Judge Sirica's letter-opener slitting the end of a manila envelope from the briefcase took on the clarity of a tap dripping in a quiet house at midnight. And there was more silence as he read.

Then Richard Ben-Veniste, an assistant prosecutor, handed up an identical briefcase, identical except for being a dull chocolate brown, which he said contained

"material which is made reference to in the document you just read." The second briefcase was locked, he said, with the key sealed in an envelope within the manila envelope.

By then, the true business that had brought all these actors to this particular stage had been concluded; an indictment — its contents unknown but suspected to most of those in the courtroom — had been, for once quite literally, handed up to the courts, meaning Judge Sirica. But there were formalities to go before the end.

The judge reminded the grand jurors that they were under orders, and so was everyone else connected with the case, not to discuss it. He told them that they might be asked to come back to the courthouse in about two weeks, and that they were not discharged. Each day that they meet, the jurors receive \$20 each.

Then the grand jurors filed out, with a protective escort of United States marshals to screen them from the persistently curious.

Mr. Ben-Veniste and Judge Sirica had a brief, amicable exchange about setting a time for arraignment. For the first time, a defendant's name was mentioned — John N. Mitchell's name — and there was a sigh of recognition in the courtroom.

There was, after that, nothing more to be said or done in that second-floor courtroom. The action and the drama lay in the 50 typewritten, legal size pages in the clerk's office on the floor below, the indictment with its detailed allegations of men conspiring to "commit offenses against the United States" and using "deceit, craft, trickery, and dishonest means" to defraud the United States.