Pat 5/c/73

No Whitewash at the White House?

"One of the toughest problems we have in this life is seeing the difference between the apparent and the real, and in basing our actions only on that which is real. We all must do that more than we do. I have confidence in the ultimate prevalence of truth; I intend to do what I can do to speed truth's discovery."

—From the letter of resignation submitted to the President on Monday, by his assistant, John D. Ehrlichman.

Well, it is never easy sifting out the apparent and the real, and we share Mr. Ehrlichman's view that we must all try harder in this respect. But we have markedly less confidence in the contribution Mr. Ehrlichman can make to this endeavor as a consequence of the latest, and perhaps most shattering turn of events in the sordid tale of Watergate and the related allegations of corruption which are now enveloping, and seeming almost to overwhelm, the Nixon administration. And we have rather less confidence, too, in the contribution to truth made by the President on Monday night. We had intended today to return for a further, closer examination of the President's Watergate address. But that can wait. For much of what the President had to say about justice and law enforcement and respect for our governmental and judicial processes would seem to have been pretty thoroughly mooted—perhaps even shredded—by the announcement made yesterday in open court by the judge in the Daniel Ellsberg trial.

You will recall that the judge in that proceeding earlier made public an allegation that the notorious burglary team of G. Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt, already jailed for the Watergate break-in, had practiced their investigatory skills on the offices of Mr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Yesterday, the judge reported in open court some further details. On the basis of this report, we invite you to consider the following sequence of events:

This past Friday (the judge disclosed) Mr. Ehrlichman told FBI investigators that in 1971 President Nixon had personally ordered an independent investigation of Mr. Ellsberg. In response to the President's request, Mr. Ehrlichman said he himself engaged, for this purpose, the services of Mr. Liddy and Mr. Hunt. While he denied that he instructed them to break and enter, he admitted that he learned, after the fact, that they had done just that. And yet, he said, he did not report this apparent crime.

That was on Friday. On Monday this same Mr. Ehrlichman resigned from his job as the President's top White House man for domestic affairs, denying his involvement in the Watergate, proclaiming his honesty and professing to have had his usefulness impaired by "repeated rumor, unfounded charges or implications and whatever else the media carries."

And this, of course, is the same impression we were given by the President on Monday; in a statement in the morning and in his speech that night, he gave Mr. Ehrlichman nothing less than the cleanest possible bill of health—"(one) of my closest friends and most trusted assistants . . . (one) of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know." To see his acceptance of Mr. Ehrlichman's resignation as "evidence of any wrongdoing," he said, would be "both unfair and unfounded." That was Monday, when three days earlier, according to an FBI report, Mr. Ehrlichman was apparently implicating himself in setting in motion a sequence of events that allegedly lead to a burglary. We most emphatically do not wish to jump to any of the assumptions that the President warned against; we merely note the unmistakeable evidence cited by a federal judge from a report of an FBI interview: that Mr. Ehrlichman, by his own admission, knew at the very least of a crime which he apparently did not report. Something else he apparently must have known bears directly upon the break-in at the Watergate—that Mr. Liddy and Mr. Hunt were available for, and inclined toward, this sort of work on behalf of the government. Would not this have aroused a suspicion or two in the mind of an intelligent, honest, prudent man when the news broke of the Liddy-Hunt connection with the Watergate? Wouldn't a close friend and trusted aide, even assuming he had not the faintest connection with Watergate, have wondered whether this wasn't something the President ought to know about?

At this point, we merely ask. The answers to these and a great many other questions, we would guess, will be a long time coming out. The most it seems safe to say for now, a mere 24 hours after the President's supposedly definitive declaration on these matters, is that a large part of what Mr. Nixon said on Monday must already be considered—if we may borrow a phrase from Mr. Nixon's White House—inoperative, both as to its content and its desired effect. For Mr. Nixon either knew or he did not know of Mr. Ehrlichman's interview with the FBI on Friday. So we have a simple choice; either his own investigation into the facts, for which he has made such large and reassuring claims, was hopelessly incomplete, or he deliberately suppressed this evidence of appalling malfeasance when he gave his final vote of confidence to Mr. Ehrlichman.

If the President is serious about his yearning to put the Watergate scandals and all the rest behind him and to move on to the building of "structures for peace" and to other things, it should be more apparent than ever before that he must first rebuild a structure of government at home that will sustain public trust and bear the weight of the work he wishes to do at home and abroad. He can best begin, in our view, by accepting the advice of the Senate, and proceeding without further temporizing to place the investigation and prosecution of the Watergate and related cases in the hands of a detached and independent special prosecutor.