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The White House View of Friends and Foes

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The best guide to where it's at in Watergate is provided by the White House attitude towards the major figures implicated in the testimony of John W. Dean III. Abundant corroborative evidence on almost all of these men has surfaced over and over again.

If the President was truly innocent, he would presumably try to force the truth from these men who so abused his confidence. But far from putting on the pressure, Mr. Nixon has been playing sweet violins to men almost surely guilty of truly awful crimes.

Consider the case of H.R. (Bob) Haldeman, the former White House chief of staff who figured as number one Watergate villain in the Dean version. Sworn testimony by a reputable military officer has placed Mr. Haldeman smack in the middle of the Watergate cover-up. In particular, there is persuasive evidence that Haldeman tried to mobilize the CIA to interfere with the FBI investigation of the case.

But there has been no public word of criticism from the White House about Mr. Haldeman. On the contrary, in accepting the Haldeman resignation of April 30, Mr. Nixon called him "one of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know."

Then there is the case of John Ehrlichman, the former chief White House aide on domestic affairs who figures as number two bad guy in the Dean testimony. Impressive testimony from third parties shows that Mr. Ehrlichman had advance knowledge of the effort to burglarize the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist back in 1971. Two persons have indicated that Mr. Ehrlichman played at least a part in the destruction of government documents taken from the safe of one of the Watergate burglars.

The President, judging from logs of his conversations put out by the White House, knew much of that in mid-March, and almost all of it in mid-April. But Mr. Ehrlichman, like Mr. Haldeman, was let go only on April 30. In accepting his resignation, Mr. Nixon also called him "one of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know."

Another critical figure in the Dean testimony is former Attorney General John Mitchell. After lying about it for months and months, Mr. Mitchell has himself acknowledged that he heard advance discussions of what became the Watergate break-in. Several credible witnesses have indicated that Mr. Mitchell approved the Watergate break-in as part of a general campaign

of espionage on the Democrats.

But apart from occasional signs of nervousness at the popping off of Martha Mitchell, the White House has said nothing adverse with respect to Mr. Mitchell in public. Indeed, the logs of Mr. Nixon's phone calls show that he accepted a call from Mr. Mitchell on election night, 1972.

Another important figure is Dwight Chapin, formerly the President's appointments secretary. Mr. Chapin has been repeatedly identified as a central party in the illegal sabotage operations against Democratic political leaders during the 1972 campaign.

But Mr. Chapin left the White House

under no cloud. He was given a job by a federally regulated company that does not normally act in a way calculated to displease the President. The White House has constantly denied that Mr. Chapin was fired, or even eased out, because of Watergate connections.

As a final example, there is the case of William C. Sullivan. While serving as an assistant to J. Edgar Hoover, Mr. Sullivan spirited documents compromising the administration out of the FBI and into the White House. This act was apparently done without the knowledge of Mr. Hoover, and resulted in the growth of a bitter spirit of animosity towards Mr. Sullivan in the FBI.

But though forced out of office by Mr. Hoover, Mr. Sullivan was brought back to the Justice Department by the Nixon administration after Hoover died. He is now resigning as director of narcotics intelligence. But the resignation comes under fire of his former colleagues in the FBI, not with any adverse criticism from the President, the White House or even the Attorney General.

The solicitude shown for these men by Mr. Nixon cannot seriously be put down to scrupulous regard for the workings of the judicial process. Such scruples did not deter the White House from vilifying John Dean when it first seemed he was going to hit Mr. Nixon hard in his testimony.

In fact, the pattern of events suggests a contrary motive. Mr. Nixon seems to be flattering, protecting and otherwise sweetening precisely those who are in position to tell the truth and assure that justice be done. Maybe his motive isn't to buy their silence. But he certainly isn't behaving with the outraged sense normal to an innocent leader betrayed by the men he most trusted.