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Tracing the Role of John Mitchell

John Mitchell is something else. He was the President's friend, partner, campaign manager and Attorney General. He could reach Mr. Nixon without saying "Please, Mr. Haldeman," or "By your leave, Mr. Ehrlichman." He could talk to the President man to man, and across the board.

So Mr. Mitchell cannot cop the apparatchik's plea. He can't claim, with past witnesses before the Senate Watergate Committee, that he was only following orders, or working a narrow piece of the street. He is a central figure in reading the Watergate riddle. And these are some of the questions I think everybody will want to keep in mind as he testifies.

First, there are questions regarding that nearly forgotten event, the abortive break-in on Democratic headquarters back in June 1972. Mitchell himself has acknowledged that prior to the break-in, he had three times heard the project proposed. Thus on June 17, after the burglars had been caught in the act, Mitchell was not in the dark. He knew the incident had important connections to the campaign committee and to the White House.

So what did he then do? Did he investigate the burglary in any serious way? If he did, what did he find out? If he didn't why didn't he? And what actually was his role in ordering the break-in?

What about telling the President when and there? Though their friendship seems to have cooled at the time, Mitchell and Nixon were certainly seeing each other. They had a talk on June 20. But about what? Did Mitchell alert the President to the dangers of Watergate? If not, why not? Wasn't he being derelict in his duties as friend and campaign manager? Why did he then resign as campaign manager on July 1?

Did the President ask Mitchell about Watergate? If he did, did Mitchell lie? If the President didn't ask, how can anybody believe his claims that he was consistently trying to get to the bottom of the affair?

A third set of questions has to do with the domestic espionage activities carried out by the FBI when Mitchell was Attorney General and now inextricably linked with Watergate. What about the so-called national security wiretaps on White House staff members and reporters? Did Mitchell order those taps? How did he know national security was involved? Did the President tell him? Or was it the President's adviser on national security, Henry Kissinger?

How about the break-ins and taps not conducted by the FBI? Did Mitchell order the action against the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg? Or against the roommates of Mary Jo Kopechne only a few days after her death in the Chappaquidick incident? Or on the home of this columnist? If he didn't, were those actions legal? Shouldn't those responsible be prosecuted by federal authorities?

What about the relations between the administration and J. Edgar Hoover. How come the administration persisted with domestic espionage despite the opposition of Hoover? Why were FBI files transferred from the Justice Department to the White House office of John Ehrlichman? Was the President consulted, as Ehrlichman indicated on the CBS television show "Sixty Minutes?"

Where did Mitchell develop the quaint idea that he could authorize wiretaps on American citizens without court orders? What, by the way, is his attitude toward statements made un-

der oath to a congressional committee? Does he stand, despite a mountain of contrary evidence, by his sworn testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 14, 1971, that he had no Republican Party responsibilities on that date?

Finally, there pours forth a flood of questions about a Watergate cover-up. The equivalent of a cast of thousands has testified that Mitchell was deep into hush money and promises of clemency. What does he himself have to say about involvement in the elaborate plot to obstruct justice?

More interesting, how much did President Nixon know of the cover-up? The President himself, his counsel John Dean and his special counsel Charles Colson have all said Mr. Nixon knew something was seriously wrong as of March 21. Mr. Nixon met with Mitchell, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean on March 22.

What happened at that session? Did Mitchell not tell the President about the cover-up, and its coming apart? If not, why not? Did the President not ask Mitchell? Did he show any signs of having the wind up? How does that square with the President's statement, in his nationally televised speech of April 30, that "on March 21, I personally assumed the responsibility for coordinating intensive inquiries . . . to get all the facts.

The upshot of all these questions is that the issue is not whether the Senate committee can break down Mitchell's defenses. The issue is whether Mitchell can dispel the doubts which must be resolved before the President can expect to get out from under the black shadow of Watergate.

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