

Prison Sentences Of Watergate Trio Halved by Sirica

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U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica yesterday cut by half the original prison sentences he imposed on the three top figures convicted in the Watergate scandal—former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former top White House aides H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman.

Sirica's reduction of the sentences for the three men to 1-to-4 years probably will be his last official Watergate-related act since he assigned the original Watergate break-in case to himself more than five years ago. He ruled from the bench, without explanation for his reasoning, after an unusual hearing in which the defendants' recently tape-recorded statements of contrition were played in open court and their attorneys begged for leniency for their clients.

The ruling by the judge leaves uncertain the exact dates of the release from prison for the three defendants, the only Watergate figures still in jail. Ehrlichman, who has already served 11 months in prison and therefore will be eligible for parole in the Watergate cover-up case by the end of this month, probably will be the first to be considered for release.

However, Ehrlichman also is serving a concurrent 20-month-to-five-year prison sentence imposed by U.S. District Court Judge Gerhard A. Gesell for his conviction in the White House "plumbers" case. Gesell has not yet ruled on a motion to reduce that sentence, and if it is not reduced Ehrlichman would still have to complete a 20-month minimum for that conviction.

Haldeman and Mitchell have been in prison since June 22, when their ap-

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peals were completed. They will not be eligible for parole until next June 22.

Although each defendant on tape and each attorney in person made strongly personal pleas for release from prison, the common threads that ran through all the arguments were that of remorse stated by the defendants and the attorneys' claims that each defendant was broken financially and otherwise by his plight.

For former Attorney General Mitchell, defense attorney William Hundley said, the major factors in favor of his early release are a hip condition that requires major surgery, his "true remorse" over his role in Watergate, and the need of his teenage daughter to have her father at home.

"Even one day in jail for a former Attorney General of the United States is a very, very severe sentence," Hundley said in asking that Mitchell's prison term at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama be reduced to time served.

Sirica had asked Herbert Vogt, deputy chief of the U.S. Probation office here, to visit the defendants in prison to ascertain their current attitudes and to tape those conversations. Vogt took the witness stand yesterday and played those tapes for the court, an unusual procedure that eliminated the need for the defendants to be brought from their prisons to the courtroom for the hearing.

Mitchell, 64, his voice firm but somewhat quieter than normal, said he was "truly sorry" for his actions and that no set of circumstances would ever again "lead me to commit such deeds." He said he has "accepted

the outcome" of the judicial process, and that his reflections in prison had "led me to considerable remorse and distress."

Ehrlichman's attorney, Stuart Stiller, read a portion of a letter his client had written to the judge in June, in which the 52-year-old former White House aide proclaimed, "I am guilty in law and in fact and I have learned to accept this."

In one of the few mentions of former President Nixon in yesterday's hearing, Ehrlichman said he allowed himself to be "abused" by the former chief executive.

In his 25-minute, sometimes emotional tape-recorded statement, Ehrlichman warned presidential advisers to watch out for "red flags" that indicate their conscience is being taken over by that of their supervisor. "I abdicated my moral judgments and turned them over to someone else," Ehrlichman said in the interview taped at the Safford, Ariz., prison camp.

Haldeman's taped statement, in which he stated "very real remorse. . . I do totally accept responsibility for my action," was delivered in a monotone familiar to those who watched him testify in various hearings.

Haldeman, 50, said he was not sure what he would do upon release from the Lompoc, Calif., federal prison, but that he was sure he would be able to make a "constructive contribution to society to counterbalance the destructive contribution" he made previously.

"I have strong feelings of responsibility that whatever wrong was done will never be done again by me," he said.

All three defendants were originally sentenced to 30-months to 8 years in prison after their convictions on Watergate cover-up charges.

Watergate big fish have sentences cut

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica ended his long involvement in the Watergate case Tuesday by drastically reducing the sentences of the biggest fish netted in the scandal.

He reduced the 2½-year to 8-year sentences to John N. Mitchell, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman to a period of "not less than one nor more than four years."

Ehrlichman, who went to prison without waiting for the outcome of his appeals, thus becomes eligible for parole from his Watergate cover-up conviction after Oct. 28.

He still is under a 20-month to five-year sentence for his conviction in the so-called Watergate plumbers case but

it was expected that the judge in that case would reduce the time to conform with that handed out by Sirica. For Haldeman the magic date is June 21 next year and for Mitchell, June 22.

Sirica made his decision after hearing tape recorded requests for leniency by the three men, and eloquent pleas by their lawyers.

Sirica was chief judge of the U.S. District court in the District of Columbia when the seven Watergate burglars were indicted on Sept. 15, 1972. He assigned himself to hear their trial and that began an involvement that ended only Tuesday.

"I'm glad it's the last major decision I'll have to render in this case," he told a reporter before entering court. "It's a

long, difficult case, in many respects a sad case. I'm glad to see the end of the tunnel."

There are no more Watergate prosecutions pending and it is expected that Sirica will soon voluntarily take the title of senior judge, which will free him from day-to-day courtroom responsibilities. He is 73.

Mitchell, Haldeman and Ehrlichman were convicted of conspiring to cover up White House involvement in the Watergate scandal and of lying about it afterward. They fought their conviction and sentences up to the Supreme Court without success and there were no

judicial remedies remaining other than Sirica's action.

If Sirica had failed to reduce their sentences their only other recourse would have been intervention by President Carter.

Ehrlichman, 52, formerly domestic counselor to Richard Nixon when he was president, has been in the federal prison camp at Safford, Ariz., since last Oct. 28. Mitchell, 64, who was Nixon's attorney general, went into prison at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama on June 22 and Haldeman, the Nixon chief of staff, entered the prison facility at Lompoc, Calif., the day before.