

Ehrlichman at the Helm

THE COMPANY. By John Ehrlichman. Simon & Schuster. 313 pp. \$8.95

By LAURENCE STERN

WATERGATE IS NO LONGER merely a synonym for political crime. It is now, as well, a simile for spiritual conversion. And it has become a symbol of literary industry in the shadow of the debtor's warrant—somewhat in the same way that Grubb Street evoked the steamy endeavors of 17th-century London hacks.

In the vein of spiritual catharsis Watergate has given us Jeb the Penitent and Charles the Reborn. Now, in novelistic form, we have John of the Epiphany—John Ehrlichman, that is, the Gauleiter of the West Wing, the Gideon of the White House Plumbers and apostle of the "limited hang-out."

Crudely crafted though it is, with cardboard and pruning shears, Ehrlichman's novel does give us a strong whiff of the paranoia and isolation of the presidency under Richard Nixon. The fictional disguises are, to say the least, flimsy. Of Richard Monckton, the incoming Republican president in his novel, Ehrlichman writes "the cartoonists loved to exaggerate his cheeks and jowls, his broad nose and dark brows." Dr. Carl Tessler, the bespectacled Harvard-based foreign policy theoretician who becomes Monckton's special assistant for national security affairs is another model of verisimilitude as Henry Kissinger.

The composite portrait is of an administration that is not only beyond

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ideology but beyond politics, in the conventional sense of relating to policies and constituencies. The White House of Richard Monckton/Nixon is a curiously airless place, disconnected from public roots. John Ehrlichman, who was after all in the middle of it all, depicts the American presidency as a conspiracy against the rest of the government and, for that matter, the rest of us.

"I will make foreign policy. At the White House," Ehrlichman has Monckton/Nixon declare as he recruits Tessler/Kissinger for the job of national security assistant. "I will tell those little s***s at State what to do and when to do it. If you come in your job will be to make sure that they do it. You and I will call the shots, make no mistake about that." And so they did.

The moral temperature in which the intrigues of the Monckton/Nixon regime are enacted is that of a meat freezer. The State Department, street demonstrators, journalists, the FBI and even the CIA are all suspect. They are threats to the presidency, either through disloyalty, political hostility or simply bureaucratic incompetence. In this climate of intramural conspiring, issues of political principle are about as relevant as the Old Testament in a Bangkok massage parlor. Issues are absent from the White House depicted by Ehrlichman.

It is appropriate, then, that the plot centers on a conflict between the president and his Director of Central Intelligence William Martin/Richard M. Helms. In developing this line of conflict Ehrlichman's narrative so closely approaches the events surrounding the departure of Helms as CIA director that we must assume he is trying to tell us something. He is, in fact, propounding a theory of the agency's involvement in Watergate.

The fictional Helms knows that his days are limited in the administration of Richard Monckton, who is no admirer of the CIA or its director. This, in fact, accurately characterized Richard Nixon's attitude toward the agency and toward Helms, whom he regarded as an agent of the Georgetown establishment. And so, in the Ehrlichman account the CIA records with cameras the installation by the White House Plumbers of a wiretap in the home of a long-established Washington political columnist who is drawn in hues of anglophilic effeteism so familiar almost as to be actionable.

Once Martin/Helms has the photographs in his attache case he knows that he can extort an acceptable settlement from President Monckton/Nixon. There is a meeting at Camp David in which the CIA director apprises the president of his find and demands—in return for keeping the Plumbers operation secret—a pleasant ambassadorial post and the right to name his successor. The director also insists that the president destroy an old, though still highly-classified report on a Bay-of-Pigs style operation which would destroy the intelligence official's public reputation.

The final meeting between Helms and Nixon also took place at Camp David. There has never been an authoritative account of what transpired between the two men other than the decision of Helms to resign as director of the agency to which he had dedicated his entire professional life. Ehrlichman now insists he had no special knowledge of what happened at Camp David although he did, at the time, enjoy the full confidence of President Nixon. Ehrlichman was in fact the senior White House liaison officer with the CIA on matters concerning the Plumbers. "It's just my theory," Ehrlich-

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Ehrlichman

At the

Helm

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man maintained in a telephone interview during a recent visit here to flog the book.

And yet . . . I could not help but recall a luncheon interview Helms granted me in the dining room of the Hay-Adams Hotel late in August, 1972, when the first reverberations of Watergate were being felt here. When the conversation turned to Watergate he spoke with a curious air of preoccupation. No one on the CIA payroll, he assured me, was found to have been involved in the Watergate episode. How terrible it was for Pat Gray, Helms observed, to have inherited the scandal in his debut as acting FBI director.

It was not until a year after that lunch that the final piece of evidence—the “smoking gun”—appeared in the congressional impeachment hearing to force Richard Nixon into retirement. It was the June 23, 1972, White House tape that disclosed President Nixon's direct implication in the scheme to suborn Helms and the CIA into participating in the Watergate cover-up.

I continue to wonder where the line falls between Ehrlichman's imagination and what he knows. □