

Two Days of Mr. Mitchell

Part 7/12/73

"We had to destroy the village to save it." If you read "Nixon presidency" for "village," you will see how the nightmare logic that was given voice in the course of the Vietnam war applies to the Watergate confessions of John Mitchell. Again and again during his two days of public testimony before the Ervin committee, the former Attorney General and Nixon campaign director defended the proposition that somehow the Nixon presidency and its value to the nation could only have been "saved" by—in effect—perverting its integrity and making it an accomplice to the commission of common crimes and wholesale violations of the Constitution it was sworn to uphold. Taking Mr. Mitchell's account of events at face value, along with his explanation of his own motives in participating in the Watergate cover-up, one can only be astounded by its arrogance, by the paraphrase that springs to mind: We had to destroy the President to save him.

The "we" in this case includes Mr. Mitchell and those other high (and medium high) officials of the President's government and campaign who, according to the former Attorney General, failed to inform the President of the crimes that had been committed in his behalf and sought to prevent those crimes from coming to public attention by—what else?—committing further crimes. Had the President found out about it all, Mr. Mitchell explained, he would have "lowered the boom" on the malefactors and then the public would have got wind of it and then the President himself might have been harmed in his re-election campaign. Looking about him at the political wreckage now, Mr. Mitchell curiously enough still seems to harbor some confusion as to whether he might not actually have been right in his thinking at the time. "Probably"—he concedes—he was wrong, but he doesn't seem to be sure.

And yet even that much concession is more than John Mitchell seemed capable of offering in terms of the legal and moral questions involved. His Senate interrogators were able to draw from him, in strictly practical, expedient terms, an opinion that the attempt to cover-up these things had certainly led to a messy situation. But, except for the concession Senator Weicker finally extracted from him concerning his silence on the doctor's office burglary, when they approached him on the legal and moral aspects of what he had done they generally ran into a blank wall. That was one of the strangest and

most discomfiting aspects of his testimony overall. The former chief law officer of the land did not seem *quite able to understand* the questions concerning the propriety of entertaining (at the Justice Department, no less) recommendations for criminal activities to be undertaken with his help. And the same easy amorality and obtuseness prevailed when he was questioned on the propriety of acquiescing in a strategy which called for perjury in court on the part of high campaign officials or of failing to report to the President—let alone to law enforcement officials—that some of the most powerful men around Mr. Nixon had been breaking the law systematically. The President had to get re-elected, Mr. Mitchell explained. Wasn't that explanation enough? No? Well, he had no actual obligation himself to report these things. Would that do? No? Well, actually some of the wrongdoers would be shuffled out of the White House after the election . . . and anyway, look what the Democrats would have done with an admission of White House involvement . . . and besides that the President had more important things to do than clean the criminals out of his White House—he was after all *President*. The irony turns back and devours its own tail, but Mr. Mitchell didn't seem to notice.

The former Attorney General's wistful imagery—Gordon Liddy should have been "thrown . . . out of the window"; the implicated White House aides might have been exposed, but "it would have been simpler to have shot them all"—underlined the burden of his cynical, lawless message. There was a kind of ostentatious bravado to it, a lot of sarcasm, a lot of roughneck stuff. As with previous witnesses before the Ervin committee, we will withhold any judgment concerning the veracity of Mr. Mitchell's account of the facts—particularly those that are in dispute. But taken at his word, the former Attorney General did not seem to us to present a very savory version of the facts, and—like some of the President's other defenders—he seemed to us to present, perhaps inadvertently or of necessity, a highly damaging picture of the presidential role so far as keenness and competence are concerned. We have in mind not only the default of presidential control over the White House that Mr. Mitchell suggested and invoked, but also the fact that Mr. Nixon kept an Attorney General for three years who could be as blind to the claims of a government of laws as Mr. Mitchell—by his own account—appears to be.