

Ehrlichman's 'End Run'

Part 7/13/73

John D. Ehrlichman not only moved in to take over the government's internal security function from the FBI with his infamous White House "plumbers" operation but also tried to steal a large piece of the action last year from the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CREEP).

Successful in setting up and running the "plumbers," Ehrlichman stumbled and fell—not once, but three times—in his secret grab for political power from CREEP.

The bizarre story of Ehrlichman, then President Nixon's White House domestic chief, jockeying for partial command of CREEP'S overmanned political battalions—and getting his comeuppance from CREEP's director, Clark MacGregor—came to light only after publication of Ehrlichman's outlandish accusation against MacGregor this week.

On May 4, in his first testimony to federal prosecutors on the Watergate investigation, Ehrlichman charged that MacGregor had rejected repeated Ehrlichman suggestions to "get to the bottom" of the Watergate scandal. A summary of Ehrlichman's interview with the investigators was published earlier this week.

MacGregor, the former Minnesota congressman put in charge of CREEP July 1, 1972, with the sudden post-Watergate resignation of John N. Mitchell, flatly denied Ehrlichman's accusation. Moreover, MacGregor told us, the only "repeated" proposals he was getting from Ehrlichman last summer were proposals that Ehrlichman's top lieutenants be given major campaign roles.

Thus, in those critical days, Ehrlichman was not concerned with uncovering Watergate mischief but in adding the re-election campaign to his immense presidential delegation of authority over the domestic side of the U.S. government.

Ehrlichman's pressure apparently started while Mitchell, never an Ehrlichman intimate, was still running CREEP. Ehrlichman wanted to give his own top aides, including Edward L. Morgan and John C. Whitaker of his Domestic Affairs Council staff, overall control of key states he felt CREEP was taking for granted: California, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New York and Missouri.

Ehrlichman began by applying pressure to Frederick V. Malek, top political deputy in CREEP. Malek went to MacGregor in early August, complaining that Ehrlichman's pressure was becoming intolerable and asking for help

in cooling off Mr. Nixon's powerful confidant.

But MacGregor couldn't stop Ehrlichman either. Ehrlichman kept interposing himself between CREEP and local Republican organizations. Puzzled by the pressure MacGregor set up a breakfast in his Miami Beach suite during the Republican National Convention.

At the breakfast, Ehrlichman did most of the talking but ran into a stone wall. MacGregor said no, the help of Ehrlichman's personal staff was not needed. The matter seemed closed.

It was far from closed. On either Aug. 27 or 28, after Mr. Nixon left Miami Beach to plot his fall campaign in San Clemente, MacGregor received another long distance call, this one from Ehrlichman's patron and collaborator: the all-powerful H. R. Haldeman, who was with the President.

Haldeman said Ehrlichman felt his plan had not had a "fair hearing" and was pressing Haldeman to intervene. Furious at what MacGregor later called Ehrlichman's "hammer and tongs" pressure, MacGregor nevertheless agreed to fly to San Clemente with Malek and confront Ehrlichman yet again.

With Haldeman listening, Ehrlichman went through the now familiar refrain: under Malek's field operation, CREEP was losing the biggest states to the Democrats, but the MacGregor-Malek team couldn't know it because of poor reporting from its field staff.

Again, MacGregor and Malek rejected the proposal and ridiculed Ehrlichman's political intelligence. The President, they said, would carry each state on Ehrlichman's "lost" list.

One hour later, Haldeman turned to Ehrlichman and said: "For heaven's sake, John, drop it. Clark has made his decision and he's acting within his authority." That finally finished one of Ehrlichman's longest, most futile end runs.

But Ehrlichman was also attacking in another place. He personally telephoned MacGregor's wife, Barbara, to criticize her plan to send surrogate women campaigners around the country for Mr. Nixon. Barbara MacGregor listened politely, but made no changes.

Contrary to his present claims before federal prosecutors, Ehrlichman was exerting no such energy in trying to "get to the bottom" of Watergate. If he had, John D. Ehrlichman might today still be riding in that long black limousine and running the federal government, instead of battling desperately for his life.