

Ehrlichman Looks to Future With 'No Regrets'

7/15/73



JOHN D. EHRLICHMAN
... seems more relaxed

By Lou Cannon

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John Daniel Ehrlichman is slightly thinner and more balding than he was just a short time ago when he looked down upon the world from the political heights of the White House.

He is worried about money. He has borrowed to pay the tuition for the three of his five children who are in college. He faces possible indictments that could lead to a long prison term. He knows that he may be disbarred from the practice of law. He is living day to day and has no specific plans for the future.

And yet Ehrlichman, dressed in orange sweater,

faded slacks and a well-worn pair of slippers, seemed strangely more relaxed and at ease last week than he ever had been as President Nixon's chief domestic adviser. He talked happily of a just-completed sailing trip to the Virgin Islands and of his plans to go backpacking in his native state of Washington.

And he expressed quiet pride in the accomplishment of the Nixon administration and confidence that the judgment of history would "put Watergate in perspective" and vindicate the President and himself.

What are your feelings now about Richard Nixon, as man and as President, Ehrlichman was asked.

"I don't regret for a second having come down here to help him," Ehrlichman replied. "I have no regrets at all. I think he has done great things, I think he has done good things and to the extent that I've had anything to offer to help him along, I'm glad I did. And I'll always be glad, regardless of how this thing might bounce. I have enormous affection and respect for him as an individual. He's a very complex fellow with a streak of great kindness that most people don't see, and I've been fortunate to have been the beneficiary of that. So I do feel a sense of gratitude and admiration and respect for him."

The only regrets that

Ehrlichman expresses are for the people who have stayed behind in the Watergate-shadowed White House, which is to Ehrlichman a different place from the world described by John W. Dean III.

"It was," he said "a climate of vigorous dedication to getting things accomplished. And an awful lot of good people worked very long, hard hours and got a lot of good stuff done. I think this business about climate and fear and oppression and all this kind of thing is terribly unfair to those people. And one of the abiding concerns I have in

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this whole episode is that all these good guys who were there, and a lot of them are still there, are somehow or another going to be tarred for having been there.

'Dedicated Guys'

"And it's not right. You take . . . that whole crowd of young, able, dedicated guys who dealt with these problems on farm bills and rural electrification and Indians and welfare and schools and busing and all these things that we were dealing with.

"They come at 7 o'clock in the morning and they go home at 9 o'clock at night and they were there Saturdays and they were there Sundays. And I just hate to think they're going to, somehow or another, have less than the full appreciation that the country ought to give them for what they've done."

Ehrlichman's voice was tinged with emotion as he spoke about what he believes to be the achievements of the administration.

Otherwise, he responded calmly to a variety of personal and political questions during an hour-long interview at his spacious brick home in Great Falls.

With his feet propped up on a coffee table that contained a sole book, titled "Deutschland" (Germany), Ehrlichman reiterated the now-familiar administration defense that Dean was "uniquely at the pivot point" of Watergate and that the President didn't know what was going on.

It was pointed out to him that in three years of interviews Ehrlichman had hardly ever mentioned Dean's role in the administration. Ehrlichman agreed with the observation, contending that Dean was important in the Watergate cover-up but that Watergate hadn't been a big issue at the White House.

The administration's critics, Ehrlichman contended, are "looking at a human hair under a microscope and it looks like a tree trunk."

On the day before former Attorney General John N. Mitchell implicated both

Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman in the Watergate cover-up in Mitchell's testimony to the Senate investigating committee, Ehrlichman insisted that he hadn't told the President anything because he didn't know anything.

"I was every bit as much lulled by the assurances as I'm sure he (the President) was," Ehrlichman said.

There are few assurances of any kind these days for Ehrlichman, whose world has changed since President Nixon accepted his resignation on April 30 and described him as one of "the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know."

Time on His Hands

In the old days, a big, black limousine used to pick up Ehrlichman at 7 a.m. and take him to the White House, where he ate breakfast and plunged into a 13-hour day. Now, he waits for the traffic to clear on the George Washington Parkway and drives in late for meetings with John Wilson and Frank Strickler, his Washington attorneys. He trusts in the Lord and his lawyers. He plays tennis more than he used to and sees more of his family. He has time on his hands.

The greatest comfort to the 48-year-old Ehrlichman in his hour of trial has been his Christian Science religious faith and the support

of his friends and neighbors. On his recent vacation to the Virgin Islands a dozen people came up to him and expressed their personal support or their backing of the President.

"Listen, it's been the most gratifying experience of my life," he says. "Really. Mail pours in here from our friends and people we don't know, people we've never heard of, from all over the country, from foreign countries. And it comes to the White House, and it is invariably supportive and kind . . ."

Ehrlichman believes that the vast number of people in the country have also "given the President the benefit of the doubt, are keeping an open mind." He is less certain about what has happened to the President in Washington where

he believes Watergate to have had "an immediate impact in weakening his clout with Congress—that's been observable."

Fewer Vetoes

He specifically mentions three recent appropriations bills signed by the President, all of which Ehrlichman says would have been vetoed by Mr. Nixon "if he had been in the same relative strength position with the Congress as he was in February."

While Ehrlichman believes that the Nixon administration ultimately will recover from the effects of Watergate and that the President will "regain his hold on the tiller," he recalls that Mr. Nixon was hard-hit by the Watergate disclosure of March and April.

"I know that at one point in time he was very depressed and very sad to see the way this thing had turned," Ehrlichman said. "And I'm sure it affected his outlook on these things, about which he had previously been very optimistic and very aggressive and moving very vigorously."

If Ehrlichman himself is any way depressed, it is not visible. He is a self-styled optimist, which is also the way his old friends remember him.

He was born on March 20, 1925, in Tacoma, Wash., the only child of a investment broker who made enough money to retire young and move to Santa Monica, Calif., while his son was still in grade school.

Father Died in Crash

The senior Ehrlichman wanted to join the Army Air Corps when World War II broke out but he was rejected as too old. He went to Canada instead and became an officer in the Canadian Air Force, losing his life in a crash in 1942.

Ehrlichman joined the Army Air Corps a year after his father's death and flew 26 bombing missions over Germany as a lead navigator with the 8th Air Force. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. When the war ended he enrolled on the GI Bill at the University of California at Los Angeles where he met another young Christian Scientist named Harry Haldeman. Ehrlichman went on to law school at Stanford University where one of his friends

student named Paul McCloskey, now a maverick Republican congressman from California.

When McCloskey went overseas to fight as a Marine Corps officer in the Korean War, Ehrlichman and his wife Jeanne took in McCloskey's wife and young daughter.

Ehrlichman's law school classmates thought well of him. Lewis H. Butler, who

renewed his friendship with Ehrlichman when Butler worked for the Department of Health, Education and welfare in the early Nixon administration, remembers Ehrlichman as tough, competent and decisive.

"He was hardworking, quiet, had a dry sense of humor, was very competent," says McCloskey. "He was the last guy you consider capable of dishonesty, of unethically influencing a court."

After Ehrlichman graduated, he and his wife took a vacation in Seattle.

"I kept telling her about the water and the trees and the fishing," Ehrlichman said in a 1969 interview. "When we got there the sun was shining, the strawberries were big and fat. We came back to Los Angeles and the smog was terrible, the traffic was terrible and we had a hard time finding a place to live. We decided to go back to Seattle."

In Seattle, Ehrlichman made a quick name for himself as a real estate attorney. He drifted into a conservation fight when a cement company tried to locate a plant about 250 yards from where he lived on the

shores of Lake Washington. Ehrlichman's lawsuit succeeded in stopping the cement company.

McCloskey, who with another family once drove to Seattle and camped in Ehrlichman's back yard, recalls that Ehrlichman barbecued a 30-pound salmon for them. The two young attorneys also associated professionally.

"I had the highest opinion of Ehrlichman," says McCloskey. "It's always a delicate matter referring a case to an attorney out of town and I felt more comfortable with Ehrlichman than anyone else."

That comfortable relationship did not survive McCloskey's stormy and short-lived challenge to President Nixon within the Republican Party last year.

Strains on Friendship

For months the two men maintained their friendship despite McCloskey's outspoken criticism of the Vietnam war and his increasingly personal attacks on the President. Ehrlichman took two early antiwar letters of McCloskey to the President himself and their relationship survived a stormy argument during the Cambodian invasion. On that occasion, Butler recalls, Ehrlichman picked up McCloskey in his limousine and the three of them rode together with McCloskey and Ehrlichman arguing all the way.

McCloskey says that he asked at one point, "John, how do you justify bombing civilians?" and Ehrlichman replied, "We bombed them

in World War II and you didn't complain."

The friendship cooled as McCloskey persisted in his challenge to Mr. Nixon at a time when it looked like an antiwar candidacy might weaken the President for the general election.

For his part, Ehrlichman became convinced that McCloskey was using their friendship to further his own political ambitions. Within the administration, some officials said that Ehrlichman had implied he could defuse the McCloskey candidacy and had lost face because he failed.

Ehrlichman, who doesn't want to discuss the matter now, has denied this in the past. He says he knew McCloskey well enough to know he couldn't talk him out of anything.

After the peace settlement was reached in Indochina, McCloskey sent Ehrlichman a letter in which he forwarded a "children for peace" project submitted by a constituent and started his letter with the words: "Now that the war is over, perhaps we can become friends again."

"Fundamental Problems"

Ehrlichman replied in mid-February on White House stationery that the proposal presented some "fundamental problems" for the administration. He added these words:

"More centrally, I am considerably put off by the first line of your letter. I have never considered that our friendship was in any way dependent on the fact of the war being on or off. On the other hand, your actions, statements, charges and conduct in relation to me and

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the administration which I serve have pretty well precluded a relationship that could be described as 'friendship.' Friendship has to rest on essential fairness and I don't consider that either your conduct or your statements over the last couple of years in any way meet that test."

McCloskey wrote Ehrlichman again, offering his personal friendship, after Ehrlichman's resignation was accepted. It is one of many letters that Ehrlichman says he has not yet found time to answer.

Ehrlichman's old friends are for the most part inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt on Watergate. They are less charitable about his role in meeting with U.S. District Court Judge W. Matt Byrne Jr. during the Daniel Ellsberg trial.

"That's something that anyone who is 21 and an attorney knows you're not supposed to do," says Butler.

Ehrlichman's own explanation is that he met with

the judge strictly to discuss his appointment to the FBI and that it was up to Byrne to decide whether to have the meeting. A second meeting, on a park bench in Santa Monica a half block from the home of Ehrlichman's mother, was held at Byrne's invitation, he has said.

Ehrlichman is under investigation by a Los Angeles County grand jury for his role in the break-in of the Beverly Hills office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Despite Ellsberg, despite Watergate, despite everything, Ehrlichman is publicly uncritical about what happened within the Nixon administration. He denies there was "a climate of fear" or a "state of siege" within the White House or that the President kept to himself and was kept carefully isolated. The adminis-

tration's concern about protest demonstrations was not based on the President's visceral responses, in Ehrlichman's view, but on the "recognition that that kind of activity had an impact on the Congress, had an impact on public opinion and very definitely made it tough on the President to hold out in Vietnam to get the kind of a solution that he wanted to get."

Says Audits Upsetting

The concern about the Internal Revenue Service, however, seemed more of a personal matter.

Ehrlichman said the President Nixon told him twice that he was "upset" that his own tax returns had been "audited very frequently by the Kennedys—the Kennedy administration."

The IRS, in the Nixon-Ehrlichman view, was a

"good old Democratic institution notwithstanding the fact that there was a Republican President."

"We could never get a handle on it," Ehrlichman maintains. "And our IRS commissioners were never able to turn it around, so they went on hounding friends of the President and supporters of the President, and somehow or another the Democrats seemed to have immunity. And this was an observable phenomenon."

If the Nixon administration was never able to turn the IRS around it did, in Ehrlichman's view, succeed in a "constructive and salutary" reversal of a 20-year trend of increasing power in Washington. He cites limits on federal spending, changes in the budget process, increasing responsibility for state and local government.

"I think that when the history of the administration is written it will be seen in perspective, at longer range, to be a major change in direction," Ehrlichman says. "The one caveat I have is the open question of what effect the current scandal episode will have on the President's ability to put the capstone on that effort."

There is no question that the "current scandal episode" has changed the life of John Ehrlichman, who

once referred to himself as the "honest broker" in the White House.

Last year he borrowed \$20,000 from Herbert Kalmbach, the former personal attorney to Mr. Nixon, to pay off a bank debt incurred to pay the tuition costs of his three oldest children. Now, Ehrlichman says he is living on the accumulation of federal government premiums he received after his resignation was accepted.

He has been a teetotaler since 1951, and he remains one. He does not smoke. He is sun-tanned and relaxed and seemingly happy to have time again for family and friends, even under such inauspicious circumstances. Soon he will take his family back to Seattle for two months, where he will be a guest in the summer-vacated house he once owned on the shores of Lake Washington. Once he had been mentioned as a possible Republican candidate for U.S. senator from Washington state, but he knows that it is unlikely he will ever serve in government again.

Now, says Ehrlichman, he is living a day at a time and leaving the future to itself.

"I'd like to go backpacking for about a week with my kids," he says. "And beyond that, I have no specific goals."