

The Years With Nixon

JOHN EHRLICHMAN now lives in Santa Fe, is appealing his convictions in the Watergate cover-up and Ellsberg break-in cases and says he is \$400,000 in debt. His Watergate novel, "The Company," has just been published and he has started a second one. He was recently interviewed in New York by Philip Nobile, author of "Intellectual Skywriting" and "King Cancer":

Bob Haldeman told CBS's Mike Wallace that he never loved Richard Nixon. Did you?

I'd have to say no. Love implies a number of things that just weren't in our relationship. I respected the way his mind worked in some ways. In the early days, I admired his political instincts very much. But your question involves many aspects of approval that I never felt toward him.

What did you not love about him?

Our dealings were strictly business. That's the way he wanted it. There was a carefully maintained gulf between us that he never crossed. It was okay with me.

So you weren't hurt by this distance?

No. He was a fascinating character to work with. But I didn't ever see him as somebody I would find terribly interesting socially. We had very little in common.

Were you offended by the vulgarity of his common speech?

At first I was. But I became tolerant of it in due course. It was not my style. We didn't speak like that at home, nor did I hear this talk in my private law practice. It wasn't just profanity with him, but a form of psychic reinforcement.

Haldeman also said that Richard Nixon was probably the strangest man who ever occupied the White House. Do you agree?

Having seen some other occupants, I'm not sure I can support that statement. The strangest thing about him was his total obsession with politics. A high percentage of his judgment, even on the human level, was dictated by and measured against excessively narrow concerns.

In "The Final Days," Richard Nixon drank heavily. In "The Company," President Richard Monckton drank heavily. Did the man drink to excess?

Not after 1968. But when he was out of office it appeared to me that he was drinking heavily. Once he committed himself to the presidential race, he had it under control — at least until I left the White House in the spring of 1973.

Did you hear Richard Nixon make anti-Semitic remarks?

Why limit it to anti-Semitic remarks? I heard anti-everything. Name an ethnic group, political cause or position and somewhere on the tapes you'll hear Richard Nixon in an extravagant statement. He once said, "No more federal money for MIT."

But was he a true anti-Semite?

If you mean he engaged in ethnic characterizations like — "Jews are dishonest Shylocks," "Blacks are intellectually inferior," "Polacks are dumb" — yes, you'll

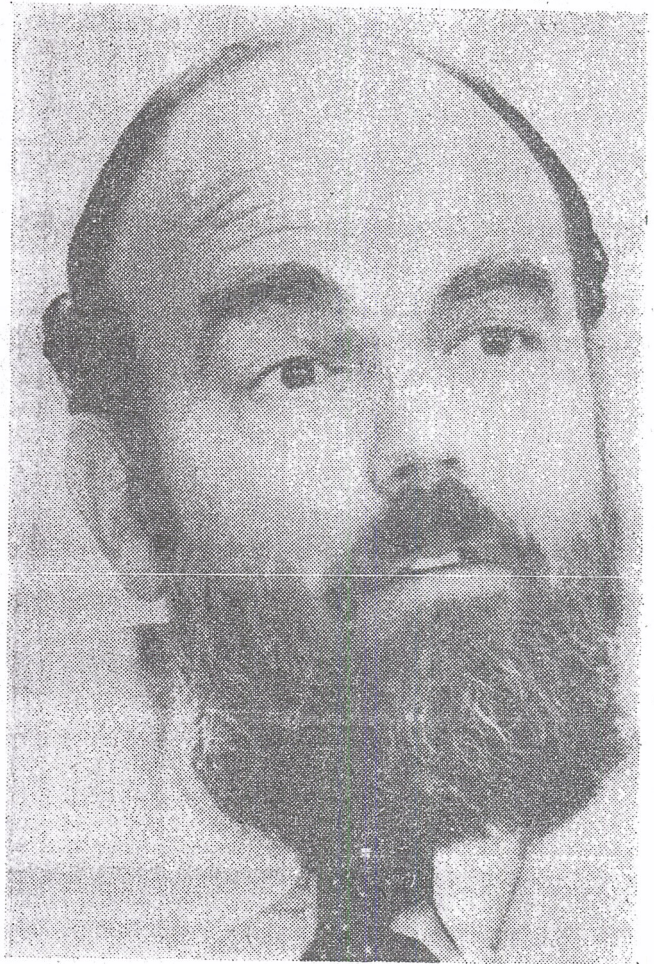
find those on the tapes. Whether he essentially believed any of that is something I'm not prepared to answer. I honestly don't know.

What do you regret about your role in Watergate?

Here again, I can't give you a full answer. But you can't be associated with a failed enterprise, at least I can't, without feeling that there must have been turning points where you might have changed directions. Obviously, I've thought of several. Some fall in the I-should-have-stood-in-bed category, that is, I should have left for my own preservation. There were minor events, too: I failed to follow through on [John] Dean's background when I discovered he was fired from his law firm on a conflict-of-interest charge. I can't say I had a good track record for alertness. The Agnew episode is the kind of thing I mean.

You disregarded all the warning signs. Why? Dean has admitted to blinding ambition.

You get caught up in the rhythm of the place. A variety of blandishments hold you in. The perks are extraordinarily seductive. It's very flattering to have the President of the United States say, "I need you" when your instincts tell you to move on. In the face of particular problems, you tend to feel that the presidency must be preserved. Much self-effacement happens in that proc-



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John Ehrlichman in July, 1973, and in May, 1976

ess. You can't put it all down to ambition. I'm rambling here because I haven't defined my own thoughts on this.

When Nixon asked you to resign at Camp David, you only asked him in return to explain why to your children. What did you want him to say to your kids?

I felt at the time that I was innocent of any wrongdoing and that I was being put overside as a diversion. As I read the conversations between the President and Henry Petersen, who was trying to get rid of me, Petersen's charges were quite flimsy. Yet the President decided to have me go. I just couldn't understand why. But he must have had something in mind and that's what I wanted him to tell my children.

Another poignant moment in the Watergate affair was when a worried Herb Kalmbach came to you about his involvement in paying money to the Watergate burglars. He testified that he looked you in the eye, saying, "I know Jeanne and your family, and you know Barbara and my family, and you know that my family and my reputation mean everything to me. And you've got to tell me here and now that this is something that is

proper. . ." Kalmbach said under oath that you told him it was proper.

That episode never happened.

Kalmbach's account is fictional?

I'm sure he believes it, but it didn't happen.

Do you mean you have no recollection of that exchange or are you stating unequivocally it did not occur?

Absolutely. I'm morally certain it didn't happen, just as certain as you would be if I told you a blue limousine was parked in front of the St. Regis Hotel when you came in this morning and you simply didn't see one.

Did you have any hint that Spiro Agnew was corruptible?

This comes under the general heading of stupidity. I had a hint back in 1971 that I didn't recognize. For example, I got a request from the Vice President's principal aide to instruct the General Services Administration to make sure that any contract awards for the state of Mar-

yland be routed through his office. In retrospect, that was a very significant request.

Haldeman and I used to pass notes to each other in the back row of Cabinet meetings. The only reason I remember this business about Agnew is because I recently ran across a pad full of these notes. In one of them I asked Haldeman what this contract matter was about. He replied that he didn't have the foggiest idea and that we should ignore it.

What did Richard Nixon really think of Agnew?

[Laughter.] It's dangerous for me to say what Richard Nixon really thought about anything. In listening to tapes of conversations I was not a party to, I can say that what he reflected to others was not what he reflected to me on a lot of subjects. However, his general opinion of Agnew was not high and he seriously considered making a change before the 1972 convention.

Specifically, what did Nixon have against Agnew?

A thousand drops on a piece of stone; not anything in particular.

It appears that Haldeman attempted to blackmail Nixon into a pardon. Were you involved in that negotiation?

I intervened for Haldeman with Julie Eisenhower. Haldeman called me in July of 1974 to say that he couldn't get through to the President. He felt very strongly that Nixon ought to consider cleaning up the entire affair with a blanket pardon. Otherwise, it was going to redound to Nixon's disadvantage as well as everybody else's. Since I had a better relationship with the family, I called Julie with Haldeman's request and that was the end of it. At the time, I was on record against accepting a pardon for myself because of the overtones of guilt.

But Haldeman's threat constituted blackmail, did it not?

I didn't make any particular judgment about his proposal — whether it was meritorious or carried the implications you suggest. I was taken aback that somebody wouldn't put Haldeman's calls through after all the loyalty he had shown toward Nixon. That's why I got involved. I didn't think the proposal represented blackmail so much as a chance to close the whole Watergate book.

Since the President was going down in flames himself, he had nothing to lose by pardoning, to use his words, two of the most distinguished public servants he had ever known. So why didn't he?

I was never led to expect a pardon from him and I wasn't surprised by what happened. Financially, a pardon would have been helpful. The money drain is beyond imagination. That's a cup I just as soon wish had been taken from me early on, even though I would have anguished about it. But in the frame of mind I was in

then — I was confident of being acquitted — I might very well have turned it down.

Are you bitter about the President's pardon?

I can't say I never felt frustrated and bitter. But as I sit here today, I can tell you that I've overcome those feelings.

How is that possible?

It's been a good year for me. I've had time to study and pray. It's a very personal matter for me and I'd rather not elaborate on it.

Assuming all your appeals are denied and you finally go to prison, what will you do further to vindicate yourself?

Public opinion is decreasingly important to me as I get a clearer sense of myself. In the next 10 years all of these questions will be more satisfactorily answered. For my own peace of mind, it is less and less important what public opinion holds. If all the tapes are released, people will have a much better idea of who did what and who advocated what positions in the total context.

You see, the special prosecutor was very artful in selecting which tapes would be reduced to transcripts and introduced as evidence. Many of them were inaccurate as they came out of [Leon] Jaworski's office. Only half the tip of the iceberg has yet been published. There are literally hours and hours and hours of other material that bear on these issues that Jaworski, for his own purposes, did not elect to come forward with.

John Dean was a principal prosecuting witness against you in the Watergate conspiracy trial. Apparently, the jury believed him and not you. Have you changed your opinion about Dean?

Nothing has changed my opinion that he was not telling the truth about me. Given the pre-trial publicity and the climate I was tried in, it's not surprising we didn't get a proper result.

Hasn't Dean's Watergate testimony been supported by the transcripts?

As far as I'm directly concerned, absolutely not. For instance, his statement that I ordered Howard Hunt out of the country has been disproved by other witnesses. But to make that point in Washington, D. C., in 1974 was like whistling upwind in a gale. Dean was caught in many, many inconsistencies, but this didn't affect the outcome of the trial.

That's funny, I don't remember Dean's inconsistencies.

I'm not surprised.

Dean came forward, pleaded guilty and went to jail for obstructing justice. Why would he lie again on the stand?

He made a deal. He got rid of theft, perjury and a

whole raft of problems with three months at Ft. Holabird. The whole process was a living, breathing example of plea bargaining.

Do you think the Watergate prosecutors wittingly used perjured testimony to put people away? Weren't they after the truth?

The truth? They tried to get convictions. Don't confuse that with the truth.

J. Edgar Hoover would be hanging from his toes today if he were alive, but his CIA counterpart, Richard Helms, is still eating caviar in Iran. Why can't anyone lay a glove on Helms while Hoover lies in disgrace?

[Laughter.] To imagine the director of the FBI hanging like Il Duce changes my whole Saturday morning. That's a very colorful image. Without singling out Richard Helms, the CIA in general has come through this entire period in remarkably good health. They put a couple of the old boys overboard in well-provisioned lifeboats. But the CIA goes on as it did before. The Senate oversight committee is a sham. It won't make a particle of difference. The White House is in no better position now to know what's happening within the CIA than it ever has been. So it will be business as usual.

Do you think the CIA has come clean on Watergate?

I doubt it, and perhaps it never will. For example, the CIA's connection with the break-in of Dr. [Lewis] Fielding's office in California has not been written about yet. It would be an extraordinarily interesting inquiry.

You were the White House point man on the Fielding break-in. Were you not aware of whom Bud Krogh hired for the job?

Now we're right smack in the middle of my case. I'll only answer that by saying I was not the point man.

What possible interest could the CIA have had in Dr. Fielding?

Whatever interest Howard Hunt had.

But that break-in wasn't Hunt's idea.

I don't know whose idea it was. The CIA's psychological profile of Daniel Ellsberg probably wasn't Hunt's idea either.

You knew Hunt was CIA before he worked at the White House. Didn't you wonder then where his loyalties belonged?

No, because at that time I didn't know that much about the CIA.

Do you expect to be pardoned by President Ford if he wins the 1976 election?

No, but I would accept one. If my appeals are successful and I received a retrial, it would cost me a half million dollars to defend. Well, I don't have it. In good conscience, I couldn't go to a lawyer and tell him I might be able to pay him in five years or I might not.