

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Five Days With Mr. Ehrlichman

It had the quality of a daytime TV show—an excessively rollicking, over-hearty, “suspense-filled” contest: all right, John Ehrlichman, you have just quadrupled your winnings on “Can You Explain This Away?” Do you want to go on for more? Invariably Mr. Ehrlichman did. And his answers, which were consistently more clever than plausible, suggested that he must be quite a whiz at riddles, conundrums and other word-and-meaning plays designed to astonish and outwit. Of these, our favorite after five days remains the distinction Mr. Ehrlichman made between E. Howard Hunt’s briefcase and its contents. Thus, Mr. Ehrlichman instructed the committee’s counsel that John Dean had testified, “I told him to get rid of the briefcase, not the contents.” The light flashes on and the scoreboard shows another “win.” But it is a game.

And what a game. Ever on the offensive, ever unwilling to concede the slightest error in his behavior (although eager to address himself to the moral failings he perceives in others), Mr. Ehrlichman has constructed a novel theory of the Watergate scandals. It is that those who sponsored them (with a few exceptions) are blameless and that those to whom the damage was done were at fault. As cockeyed as it is audacious, Mr. Ehrlichman’s theory of the case seems to absolve its author personally of responsibility for anything questionable he did. Indeed, even his tape-recording of telephone calls appears to have proceeded from nothing more complicated than the fact that his White House telephone came equipped with a knob that you could turn and thus record your calls. So it was probably the telephone’s fault. Or the dictaphone’s fault. Or something.

Finally one had to admire the sheer brilliance, the virtuosity of the performance as such. But its burden of meaning and its message were something else again. We will leave aside for the time being the stark con-

licts between Mr. Ehrlichman’s version of events and the versions rendered by half-a-dozen or more previous witnesses. What we find noteworthy are the attitudes and assumptions that informed Mr. Ehrlichman’s testimony. There was, first, the smoldering volcano of resentments—against the committee, against all political opposition, against some local “culture” which he supposes to exist that is bereft of all feeling for family, country or moral goodness.

If you saw the world that way—which is to say, if you saw those who differed from or disagreed with you in that light—it would be a short step to the conclusion that democracy simply can’t be trusted. And Mr. Ehrlichman seems to have had rather little trouble in taking that step. Thus there is evidently no criminal or autocratic act that he would deny Mr. Nixon and the Nixon entourage the right to commit on the theory that they know what is best and are only doing whatever it is—spying, housebreaking—for our own good. The generic name for this justification, of course, is “national security,” a consideration which Mr. Ehrlichman believes is not only paramount, but also peculiarly and exclusively understood by Mr. Nixon and the men who have served him.

But is it? Surely there is something wrong with a theory which asks us to believe that (1) the President and his fallen confidants were uniquely qualified to perceive in the behavior of foreign governments and individuals both here and abroad those tendencies and intentions that constituted a threat to our well-being, while (2) the same President and his same confidants were incapable of perceiving for a full year what was going on in their own inner councils, in the White House and administration over which they presided—and, indeed, in the very meetings they attended. That irreconcilable dilemma of logic is a large part of the legacy of Mr. Ehrlichman’s five days before the Senate Committee.