

Hearings Reflect the Arcane

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It took 10 weeks and nearly 2 million words of recorded public testimony, 35 witnesses and thousands of questions and maybe half as many answers, but the Senate select Watergate committee accomplished something unprecedented before it recessed last week.

It gave the millions of people who followed the hearings on television or in the newspapers something they had never seen before and may never see again—a look of the White House, a mysterious place with an arcane language and rituals all its own, and the activities of the men who worked there for Richard M. Nixon.

As witness followed witness, certain themes began to emerge from the testimony. One of these was power, how it was exercised and how delegated; how lines of authority traveled vertically within the White House and horizontally outward to the rest of the government.

Former presidential counsel John W. Dean III, whose testimony became a benchmark against which the versions of other witnesses

were constantly compared, described the men who worked directly for the President as a "do-it-yourself White House staff."

But Dean and other younger staff members made it clear that while they might indeed do things themselves, it was firmly established custom to check with a superior first. The chain of command was plain, at least within the White House.

It was between the White House and other agencies that lines of authority sometimes blurred, the testimony before the committee indicated. Examples of friction abounded.

Lt. Gen. Vernon A. Walters, the deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, spoke with some coolness about the three times in the two weeks following the June 17, 1972, break-in at Democratic headquarters in the Watergate when he was summoned to the White House by Dean, a staff man hitherto unknown to him and 20 years his junior.

Walters let his indignation bubble over during a conversation with acting FBI Director L. Patrick

Gray III, Gray recalled. The general said he had come into an inheritance and, in Gray's words, "wasn't going to let these kids kick him around any more."

Richard G. Kleindienst, the former Attorney General, told the committee how angry he became — to the point of threatening to resign—when he learned that former presidential domestic adviser John D. Ehrlichman had sought to give a direct order to one of Kleindienst's key assistants at the Justice Department.

Gordon C. Strachan, the young White House aide to whom deputy director Jeb Stuart Magruder of the Committee to Re-elect the President was nominally supposed to report, described his frustration as Magruder consistently bypassed him and reported directly to White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Halde-

man. Harry S. Truman said of the presidency that "the buck stops here"—but the Watergate hearings showed that under the White House staff system, as in any large and hierarchical organization, the buck could be passed in two directions.

Illegal activities on the part of their subordinates, both Ehrlichman and Halde-

man testified, simply did not come to their attention until last April. Ehrlichman, particularly, described Dean as an able staff man who could act with considerable independence. It was because he believed Dean was handling the Watergate affair for the White House, he said, that he did not involve himself with it until asked to do so by the President on March 30 of this year.

Dean, for his part, maintained that he always reported to Ehrlichman. And two witnesses, Walters and Herbert W. Kalmbach, the President's personal lawyer who distributed clandestine payments to the Watergate defendants, told the committee how when they dealt with Dean they first checked to make sure that it was with Ehrlichman's approval.

The White House described by the witnesses before the Senate committee was at once exciting and forbidding, different things to different people.

To Haldeman, it was an

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organization that existed to serve Richard Nixon, "one of America's greatest presidents," and to do it with flawless efficiency—"a zero-defect system," he said was his objective.

"I'll approve whatever will work, and I'm concerned with results, not methods," he wrote on a memorandum.

Though to Ehrlichman the question of White House rank was "a metaphysical concept," those who worked for Haldeman were reminded often and forcefully where authority lay.

Strachan, who came to the White House at 27 and appeared before the Watergate committee the day before his 30th birthday, said he at first found it "a pretty awe-inspiring experience" to work in such rarified surroundings, but it could be terrifying, too, he said.

He said he was "scared to death" when Haldeman summoned him to his office shortly after the Watergate burglary; he said he knew little about the incident at that point and expected Haldeman to ask him about it.

Ehrlichman appears to

have frightened fewer people than Haldeman, the Watergate testimony indicates, but may have made more of them angry since the scandal exploded this spring.

His penchant for recording the conversations of people with whom he spoke on the telephone, without telling them about it, has not been viewed with charity by the witnesses who were among those taped.

Gray, Kalmbach and Kleindienst—who called the taping "reprehensible"—were recorded by Ehrlichman and had transcripts of their conversations read to them by the committee. Transcripts of Ehrlichman's recordings of Dean, former White House special counsel Charles W. Colson and White House aide Ken Clawson have also been placed in evidence.

"Loyalty is the name of the game," Haldeman's former deputy Alexander Butterfield wrote in a memorandum, and the White House described in the Watergate hearings appears to have been staffed with strong Nixon loyalists. Many, though not all, of the witnesses still are.

Haldeman and Ehrlichman have praised the President in unequivocal terms. So, from a perspective outside the White House, have Kleindienst, Walters and former Attorney General and Nixon campaign manager John N. Mitchell.

Gray, whom the President (according to Dean in a conversation taped by Ehrlichman) said he doubted was "smart enough to run" the FBI, has been non-committal. And Dean, though he has spoken kindly of Mr. Nixon, implicated him by his testimony in the official cover-up that followed the Watergate burglary.

The hearings helped to focus the way the White House staff divided its time between matters that were political and those that weren't.

Though in 1972 there was a fully staffed, well-funded and separate organization—the Committee for the Re-election of the President—to run Mr. Nixon's campaign, regular White House staff members still found themselves deeply involved in politics.

Strachan's main duties

were liaison with the re-election committee and the preparation of "political matters memos" for Haldeman. Colson, who is scheduled to testify before the committee next month after it returns from the congressional recess, was involved with politics.

And for political work outside of the campaign—investigation of potential Democratic opponents of Mr. Nixon, for example—the White House employed a former New York police detective named Anthony Ulasewicz and paid him with surplus campaign funds channeled through Kalmbach.

No matter how it was acquired, the Nixon White House appeared to have what Dean called "an insatiable appetite for political intelligence"—however obtained.

But, as former CIA Director Richard M. Helms, a veteran of over 25 years in the intelligence business, matter-of-factly reminded the committee, "nobody knows everything about everything."