

Mitchell in Office

The Door to a Blind Alley

By Mary McGrory

Washington

When John Mitchell was attorney general, he had a "no-knock" policy in his office. His door was always open to the troubled citizen.

"Anybody had the right to go into an apartment and talk to anybody," Mitchell told the senate judiciary committee, "as long as there was no conflict of interest."

Mitchell, President Nixon's most prized counselor, had the reputation of being as approachable as a medieval cardinal, a type he somewhat resembles. With his wintry face and chilling humor, he was regarded, especially, by the protesting young, as the last man you could get to see out of court.

Not so. But there were conditions, and they were imposed. The petitioner was forbidden to mention his specific reasons, although the attorney general was at all times perfectly willing to discuss the philosophical content of the problem.

Thus, if Clifford and Edith Irving had applied they could have expected to see him. But the conversation would have to be about great plagiarisms of literature, with Howard R. Hughes strictly excluded.

SEVEN

Similarly, the seven Harrisburg defenders, if granted an audience, would have to promise to review the Gunpowder Plot and agree in advance to wash out their mouths if they mentioned Henry A. Kissinger.

Angela Davis could have had a seminar on the Nixon doctrine on Mao, if she kept herself out of it.

In any case, the hospitality of the former attorney general has been learned too late. And the only people



FORMER ATTORNEY GENERAL JOHN MITCHELL
During testimony in Washington yesterday

who seem to have known about it when it counted were executives of International Telephone & Telegraph Corp.

Harold Green, the president of the company, had no

trouble getting an appointment at the time his company was engaged in litigation with the Justice Department over three mergers. Green got 35 minutes of Mitchell's time, during which the kindly attorney general sought to enlighten the unhappy tycoon about the big picture on conglomerates.

DIRECTOR

Felix Rohatyn, the director of ITT, was in and out of Mitchell's office five times. He came to talk about the

stock exchange. On one day, April 23, he ducked out of the Mitchell meeting to hurry to the quarters of the equally cordial deputy attorney general Richard Kleindienst, where a seance was in progress on the "ripple effects" of the justice department suit against ITT.

Although the administration has been accused of being anti-intellectual, Mitchell, in his adroit testimony, shattered that canard. The men around the president are eternally gathering at round tables, theorizing, speculating, always in the abstract. Peter Flanagan, the White House aide who provided the financial analyst who wrote the final

recommendation for the out-of-court settlement of the ITT case, was often present among the theologians.

If the attorney general scrupulously avoided talking about forbidden topics, he also tried to close his ears to

political chatter while he was serving as the nation's first law enforcement officer.

REINECKE

Lieutenant Governor Ed Reinecke of California came bounding in to see the attorney general either in April or May or September — accounts differ — to report the good news about San Diego. Mitchell cast a cold eye on him.

He might have been babbling about a small town in Spain instead of the site of the GOP convention.

Mitchell had thought Reinecke had come to discuss "economic growth in California" — a matter most often taken up by provincial visitors with the Commerce department — and when Reinecke switched to politics, Mitchell simply turned him out.

"He may have talked about the convention for all I know," said Richard Nixon's once and future campaign manager. "To this day I don't know what the arrangements were, I not having any interest in it."

Such detachment in a political handler rather taxed the credibility of the Democratic senators on the committee. They are no nearer than when they started out to proving that the meetings and the settlement and the ITT donation to the convention are related and at the moment they seem too unnerved by the former attorney general's self-portrait as a hail fellow well met to know where to begin.