

Matter of Fact

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Glimpse of Life At White House

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BY BRILLIANT and determined investigative reporting, President Nixon has finally been driven to lance the Watergate ulcer. The pus can now be expected to flow rapidly, nastily and voluminously. But at least one can hope for the eventual end of what may justly be called Washington's Watergate phase.

One of the climactic episodes in this strange business tells you a lot about what it must be like to live in the very dynamo of power, which is always the White House in Washington.

To set the stage, one must begin by noting the peculiar relationships that used to exist between leading members of the White House staff and former Attorney General John Mitchell, in the days when Mitchell was the most powerful man in Washington except for the President himself. In brief, Mitchell liked H. R. Halderman. He tolerated Henry A. Kissinger. And he detested John Ehrlichman.

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MITCHELL, at a fairly large dinner table, once got onto the subject of Ehrlichman. Somewhat arrogantly, the then-attorney general said that "we" were going to get rid of Ehrlichman after the election.

This was when Mitchell still wielded enormous authority, or appeared to do so. It was also when Watergate was nothing but a strikingly ugly apartment house. Mitchell's semi-public condemnation of a leading White House staff member naturally caused a lot of talk. So Ehrlichman was eventually asked about what Mitchell had said.

"He'll go before I do," Ehrlichman replied dryly.

The stage is now set, and we move onwards to last Sunday when the President requested his former second-in-command in all but name to report for a meeting at the White House.

At the White House entrance, this man who used to be the only member of the cabinet able to see the President without permission from Bob Haldeman, was quietly told the President would not see him on this occasion. Instead, John Ehrlichman was waiting for him with "a message."

As a case of "How are the mighty fallen!" this was worthy of history's greatest student of the singularities of court life, the Duc de Saint Simon. Nonetheless, John Mitchell went to see John Ehrlichman, whose early destruction Mitchell had all but publicly vowed to contrive.

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THE "MESSAGE" Ehrlichman had been requested to deliver was the news that another figure in the Watergate case, Jeb Stuart Magruder, had begun singing like a canary. Furthermore, Magruder had implicated Mitchell.

It was a way of telling Mitchell, in truth — and through the mouth of an enemy at that — that he could no longer expect White House protection. Reflect upon the human nuances of all these twists and turnings. You will then understand the advice that an exceptionally successful departing British ambassador gave to his successor. "You want to know what to read about Washington," said Lord Halifax. "Well, I suppose I should read Saint Simon's 'Memories.' The White House is what matters most; and the White House is really a court."