

Mitchell Testimony

The testimony of former Attorney General John N. Mitchell before the Senate Watergate committee provides a dismal picture of ethical standards and human relationships in the upper levels of the Nixon Administration. Like the lower-ranking and much younger men who have preceded him in the witness chair, Mr. Mitchell freely avowed that his controlling principles were electoral expediency and loyalty to what he regarded as Mr. Nixon's political interests.

Various members of the committee tried to get Mr. Mitchell to see that he owed the President more than his personal loyalty. He owed him the benefit of his judgment, his intellectual independence and his candor. But Mr. Mitchell was obdurate in insisting that he had to protect Mr. Nixon from any knowledge of the Watergate affair, the subsequent cover-up, and those covert activities of the Presidential staff which he repeatedly characterized as "the White House horrors."

It was as if he regarded the President as a client for whom he held power of attorney and who had to be protected against his own instinctive reactions. If true, this testimony could be said to reflect deep personal loyalty to Mr. Nixon. But it also reflects either a kind of condescension on Mr. Mitchell's part or else a cynical decision to leave Mr. Nixon in a position to deny anything embarrassing or incriminating.

On his side, Mr. Nixon showed remarkable indifference to a mushrooming scandal. According to Mr. Mitchell's testimony, the President asked him specifically about Watergate only once, during a brief telephone conversation in June of last year.

Mr. Mitchell, though denying many specific points made by previous witnesses, confirmed that while Attorney General he participated in two conferences where G. Gordon Liddy proposed a campaign of illegal activities. He further confirmed that he knew that Jeb Stuart Magruder, the deputy campaign manager, was going to commit perjury before the grand jury. He also knew after the fact about various illegal activities by the White House "plumbers" which he decided for reasons of political expediency he had to "keep the lid on." These are dismaying confessions to come from the former chief law officer of the United States.

In his veiled attacks against those on the White House staff who were responsible for various "horrors," Mr. Mitchell hinted at the antagonism which apparently existed between himself and some of the President's senior aides. Not until those aides — H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson — also testify, can the Senate committee and the public weigh the relative merits of the Mitchell testimony.