

William S. White

John Mitchell: Dividing The Men From the Boys

Whatever his faults and shortcomings—and perhaps only Martha Mitchell could count them fewer than very many—John Mitchell stands up to his hips in midgets among the other Watergate characters.

However one may choose to read his testimony exonerating President Nixon from guilty knowledge in the Watergate scandals and crimes, one thing at least is abundantly clear. This is that amid the disorderly flight of so many of the President's former associates from their plain responsibilities and their obvious complicity, Mitchell has at any rate divided the men from the boys.

They shuffle about in yas-suh attitudes, all too eager to dance to whatever tune may be called by present or future prosecutors in the courts. Mitchell takes his lumps, even to the extent of allowing himself to be seen as both incredibly foolish and crudely insensitive to his obligations to a legal profession to which he had given his life.

If it is fair to say of him that rarely in high politics has an adviser been so wrong so destructively to his chief, it is also only fair to say something else. Of all the witnesses thus far heard by the Ervin committee from the President's former and discredited palace guard, John Mitchell alone has shown certain qualities that many men still value.

He had courage. He had resolution in adversity and the capacity to finish in manliness even if he did not and could not finish in style. And above all he had a loyalty to the President personally, however wrong-headed, which he now has carried through to the end.

If, in short, he is to be held to be a rogue then he is at all events a big rogue. He is nobody's (and no committee's) slyly ingratiating sycophant. Nor is he the sort to whimper for the chaplain and the medic when the big stuff begins to fly in the scene of battle.

To acquit the President of the charge that he showed very poor judgment in picking his associates is not objectively possible. Indeed, one could justly utter this charge of Mr. Nixon's choice of Mitchell but for one significant thing. However badly the President may have misread some of Mitchell's character traits—his harshly lim-



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ited and crude view of the art of politics—about one trait the President was never wrong.

In John Mitchell the President selected a man and not some spuriously golden-haired boy.

This is an interesting but also a most important factor in the most practical of terms. For while it is far too early to attempt to estimate Mitchell's total impact upon the Ervin committee and the Senate in general, my impression is strong upon one point.

That is that Mitchell has made it profoundly unlikely that the committee is ever going to be able to implicate the President in any way grave enough to support any real possibility of a forced presidential resignation, much less an impeachment.

The reasons are simply human. In the first place, senators are at heart acutely conscious of position and rank. Like him or not, this former attorney general of the United States and personal intimate of the President is to them incomparably more important than half a dozen White House aides. Moreover, again like him or not, Mitchell's refusal to slide into the immunity bath, plus the strong way he handled himself on the stand, will be in his favor when the final reckoning comes.

In short, even senators berating him are not wholly free of a strictly private admiration for the way in which he has stood up for his principle. It is my prediction that they will not readily discount his testimony in the end.