

Ehrlichman: Power and Arrogance



John Ehrlichman eyes senators during his Watergate testimony.

John Ehrlichman, the former No. 2 man in the Nixon White House who has been starring in the Senate hearings this week, is the quintessential witness to Watergate. As nobody else in the drama, he expresses the corruption of power.

For he entered office, four years ago, as probably the most sensible and reasonable man in the Nixon entourage. He comes on now, at a moment of terrible personal difficulty, as a man of maniacal arrogance.

Mr. Ehrlichman first became well-known in the 1968 campaign in connection with a remark he made about a now-forgotten action by Mr. Nixon. "It'll play in Peoria," Ehrlichman said.

That comment showed a lot of qualities. There was first a measure of detachment. Ehrlichman was not on the offensive but the defensive. He was not self-involved. He was looking at an action and making a coolish appraisal.

There was next a measure of judgment. Ehrlichman was not claiming that everything the boss did was great or terrific. It was good enough to get by.

Finally, there was a degree of intelligent articulation. Ehrlichman said what he meant in a spare way. He made his point with originality and effectiveness, even humor.

I used to see something of Ehrlichman in the first years of the administration, and I consistently found the qualities of detachment, judgment and intelligence. He could talk well and easily about such abstractions as the decision-making process. He understood the inner structure of an argument and the range of possible alternatives in a given situation.

He seemed particularly interesting in the matter of civil rights. Certainly he was no bigot. My strong impression is that he tried to hold the line against

a position of total opposition to bus-ing. Prof. Alexander Bickel of Yale, who often went to see him on civil rights issues, found him highly responsible.

Now, if ever, these qualities should be showing. Mr. Ehrlichman is in very deep trouble. Unlike H. R. Haldeman, who was his friend and mentor in the Nixon entourage, he has no great family resources. He has a wife to support and school-age children to educate.

He is under investigation by an eager district attorney in Los Angeles county for directing the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist—a common crime which carries a sentence of five years as a felony. He may well be indicted by Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox for much deeper Watergate offenses including perjury and conspiracy to obstruct justice.

Apart from his family, moreover, Ehrlichman is naked and alone. He is not part of the Haldeman gang anymore. Indeed, Haldeman and his former assistant, Dwight Chapin, were badmouthing Ehrlichman even as he prepared to take the stand. Only last weekend they were saying that he was not tough enough. In particular they attacked him for expressing a belief that tapes of the President's conversations and phone calls should be released.

So how did Ehrlichman behave in these circumstances? Well, his opening statement knocked the Senate Watergate committee, the "news media" and the "gallery." The questioning was barely under way when he made a sneering reference to committee counsel Samuel Dash as "the professor."

A little later he was tangling with Chairman Sam Ervin about points of constitutional law. Then Ehrlichman indulged himself in a long calculated slur on the memory of J. Edgar Hoover.

I do not feel sorry for Ehrlichman in any way. I think he is deep into the cover-up. I think he is lying about his own role and that of the President. Moreover, it is clear that he did despicable actions and is still without a sense of contrition.

But I am puzzled. It is not clear to me how a man of such intelligence and detachment could have been so horribly deformed. I suspect that many of us in Washington are to blame.

The climate of exaggerated respect paid the President and his agents had something to do with the development of Ehrlichman's arrogance. The disposition of the Congress to lie down before any challenge probably contributed to his cynicism. Those of us in the press did give him reason to think that we asked what he once called "dumb questions."

Whatever the importance of these elements, there is one cardinal point. The story that the President was corrupted and fooled by his aides does not pass muster. It was not the likes of John Ehrlichman who made Richard Nixon defiant and suspicious and contemptuous. The flow went the other way.