

One Man Who Deserves

By Mary McGrory
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MAYBE JOHN EHRLICHMAN will excuse me if, on the occasion of his unsuccessful plea for alternative service, I recall other views on prison policy which he expressed in my presence a long time ago.

It was March 27, 1969. John Ehrlichman came to lunch at my home with three members of the peace movement. I arranged it in the fatuous belief that it would help to talk things over.

Those were the days when we thought peace was at hand between the Nixon White House and the Washington press corps. Ehrlichman had been "tour director" of the Nixon campaign and, like the others around the sequestered candidate, jocular and open with reporters.

Some of us thought peace was at hand in Vietnam, too.

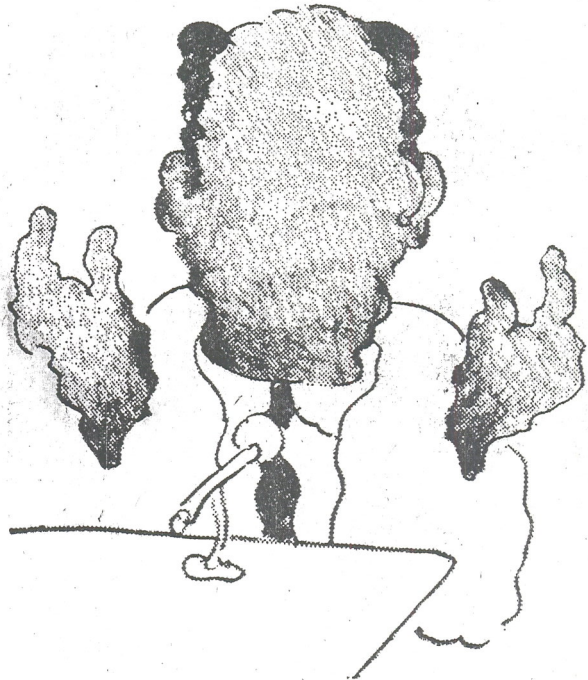
But on March 6, Nixon made ominous mention of the "possibility of escalation." Ehrlichman, loitering in the hall with other staff members to pick up early reviews, asked me what I thought. I told him the President sounded like Lyndon Johnson on the war.

"Don't say that" Ehrlichman breathed.

He said, "We have an obligation to those people over there."

I mentioned an obligation to the people over here. I told Ehrlichman that if Nixon were serious about escalation maybe he should talk to some young men I knew who planned big trouble.

Ehrlichman appeared to consider a meeting but then corrected himself. He would talk to them if I could manage it on a strictly private basis.



SAM BROWN, David Mixner and John O'Sullivan, whom I had met and liked during the McCarthy campaign, said they would be glad to parley, although they obviously did not share my hopes. They agreed to keep it quiet. (In 1970, when the country reeled over Cambodia, Ehrlichman referred to the meeting, without mentioning any names, so I feel released from the promise.)

They arrived together. Sam Brown came down from the Kennedy Institute. John O'Sullivan cut law classes in New York. Mixner was still in town.

Alternative Service

Sam Brown caught the anxious eye I directed to his collar-length, wavy brown hair.

"No," he said quickly.

"For the cause, Sam," I said, and we all trooped off to the bathroom, where I did a little snipping, amid many groans.

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EHRlichman SURGED in, prompt to the moment. He struck the first blow.

"Any of you fellows ever been in the army?" he asked with the cock of the head and the cock of the eyebrow that a million Americans came to know during the Ervin committee hearings.

Lunch, if I say so myself, was good. The first asparagus was in. The main course was meatloaf, which the world knew was a presidential favorite, and so, presumably, acceptable to a subordinate.

The conversation was dreadful, as it always was and will be when the subject is Vietnam. I do not remember the details—all discussions of that war are alike. I only remember the sinking feeling which came over me—and which was to stay with me for days.

And I remember the final, shouted confrontation.

"You'll go," Ehrlichman told them.

"We won't go," they shot back.

"We'll put you in jail," he said, and he wasn't kidding.

"The jails won't hold us all," from them.

Ehrlichman, as usual, had the last word. There was a razor-quick smile, and then, in a

fake German accent, "We'll build higher and wider stockades."

He left soon afterwards. We four sat and looked at each other. Sam Brown eyed me coldly, "I cut my hair for that?"

What happened afterwards is known. Two months later they began organizing the Vietnam Moratorium. Spiro Agnew called them "an effete corps of impudent snobs." And John Ehrlichman began to do those things which brought him into the jurisdiction of Judge John Sirica.

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IN THE YEARS since, the young men began to master the system. Sam Brown was overwhelmingly elected state treasurer of Colorado last November. He led a candlelight protest around the Capitol on the second anniversary of the Paris accords. David Mixner, who also lives in Denver, is a lobbyist on energy and conservation for the Rocky Mountain Federation. While Ehrlichman was being sentenced last month, Mixner was making the rounds on Capitol Hill, getting a word in edgewise against the new Vietnam appropriation. John O'Sullivan is a lawyer for the City of New York, a specialist on utility rates.

And John Ehrlichman, if he loses his appeal, will go to prison, which he once threatened them with. He was turned down for alternative service. I wish he could have gotten it. I wish even more that during his White House years, he had seen the virtues of alternative service for those young men who didn't want to go to Vietnam.

If the war had not continued, there would have been no Ellsberg, no break-in, no Watergate, no cover-up, no trial, no jail.