

Watergate quartet begins pre-sentencing interviews

WASHINGTON (AP) — John D. Ehrlichman Thursday became the first of four men convicted in the Watergate coverup trial to submit to a pre-sentencing interview at the Probation Office of the U.S. District Courthouse.

All four former high officials of the Nixon administration — Ehrlichman, H.R. Haldeman, John N. Mitchell and Robert C. Mardian — must undergo interviews required of all convicted felons awaiting sentencing.

For about a half-hour, a probation officer asked Ehrlichman questions

about his background and personal life, officials said.

The four men will remain free over the next 30 days while the Probation Office prepares a report and recommends to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica how severely the men should be punished.

The judge has set no sentencing date pending completion of the probation report.

Within a month after sentencing the appeals process will go into motion. But already some defense lawyers are

looking beyond the U.S. Court of Appeals to the Supreme Court.

"I would guess that appeals from all four defendants will end up in the Supreme Court," said one defense attorney Thursday.

The four men were found guilty Wednesday of conspiring to obstruct the investigation of the June 17, 1972, break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters.

Although the effective date of any jail

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sentence is up to the judge, chances are the defendants will remain free at least until the appeals court rules, a process likely to take a year or more. The Supreme Court appeal could last more than two years, according to some lawyers.

Although Sirica has been criticized for his activist role and for offhand comments made during the trial, it appears unlikely that his behavior will result in reversal.

The appeals court, said one defense lawyer, "is not going to care about little points that would reverse a murder case. Generally the court takes a different view on big white-collar crimes than on cases against poor people where they are more likely to explore technical errors by the judge."

Beyond that, the intense publicity of the impeachment hearings of the House Judiciary Committee and the resignation of former President Richard M. Nixon so firmly cemented opinions that an impartial jury was impossible to find, defense lawyers say.

Nixon was an issue throughout much of the trial because of a subpoena issued for the former President to appear as a

witness in Ehrlichman's defense.

An aide to Nixon said Thursday that the former President would not comment on the verdict because the defendants intend to file appeals. He added, however: "President Nixon is deeply anguished by Watergate and that these men who were among his closest aides and their families have suffered so much and that their lives have been so tragically touched by Watergate."

When Nixon fell seriously ill with phlebitis, Sirica appointed three doctors who examined Nixon and recommended that no testimony from Nixon be taken before Jan. 6, five days after the verdict was returned.

Meanwhile, former Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. urged that Watergate related prosecutions continue. The retired chairman of the Senate Watergate committee said the four guilty verdicts were not surprising.

In his hometown, Morganton, N.C., Ervin said, "They have prosecuted a lot of corporate executives for making illegal campaign contributions but they haven't prosecuted anybody I can recall for soliciting or receiving them."