

By Robert S. Boyd

Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — President Nixon wasn't the only one bugging himself in the White House. His top aides were also busy taping each other's phone calls and conversations, especially earlier this year when the Watergate affair began to overwhelm them.

Even before Monday's announcement that all of the President's conversations since the spring of 1971 have been recorded, witnesses before the Senate Watergate committee revealed numerous instances of staff aides taping each other or outsiders.

"Testimony indicates that this system was widespread throughout the staff," the committee's chief counsel, Samuel Dash, said.

Embarrassed

Disclosure of their candid comments has embarrassed some people who were unaware that their words were being recorded.

Many of the tapes, or transcripts of them, have been subpoenaed by the Senate committees. Other copies are in the hands of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

Some of the recordings were made, witnesses said, in order to have a complete record of calls or interviews.

Others were apparently made for motives of self-defense in the poisoned atmosphere that enveloped the White House this year.

Hidden Mike

For example, former Attorney General John Mitchell testified last week that ex-White House domestic czar John D. Ehrlichman once tried to maneuver him into a seat close to a hidden

microphone in Ehrlichman's White House office.

The incident occurred on April 14, when Ehrlichman was trying to "smoke out" Mitchell to see if he would accept part of the blame for Watergate.

Asked why he thought the conversation was bugged, Mitchell said: "Most of the time I met in John Ehrlichman's office, we sat on a sofa around a coffee table . . . But at this particular time he invited me over to sit in a chair in front of his desk and fudged around a little bit . . ."

"It occurred to me that the switch in pattern of operation might very well have something to do with where the microphone was," Mitchell said.

Taped Call

Ehrlichman also taped a phone call he made to Mitchell's successor as Attorney General, Richard Kleindienst, on March 28. Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) read the transcript of the call into the hearing record.

Ehrlichman placed the call to Kleindienst, who was visiting at his parents' house. After making sure that Kleindienst was on a non-governmental phone, Ehrlichman discussed ways to hush Weicker, who was then being very critical of White House handling of Watergate.

Another witness, Jeb S. Magruder, Mitchell's deputy at the Committee to Re-elect the President, testified that he began to suspect last winter that he was being "set up" to take the blame for Watergate.

The suspicion began in December, at a conference with John Dean which Magruder believes was taped. Dean at the time was claiming to have forgotten details of meetings early in 1972 in which plans for the Watergate bugging were discussed, Magruder said.

"All subsequent meetings that I had with either Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman, and I gather meetings I had with Mr. Dean from that time on, were taped," Magruder told the Senate committee.

Federal prosecutors have a tape of a meeting between Haldeman and Magruder on March 29. The Senate committee has the tape of an April 19 meeting between Magruder and Lawrence Higby, a Haldeman aide.

And Magruder said Ehrlichman taped a meeting they had on April 20, when Magruder gave him an outline of his role in Watergate.

Haldeman's lawyer, John J. Wilson, said Haldeman began taping conversations with Magruder in late March after hearing that Magruder was talking to reporters and federal investigators. Wilson said the tape covers one talk with Haldeman and two or three with Higby.

Wilson said his other client, John Ehrlichman, also taped "six or seven conversations" with various people implicated in Watergate. He declined to identify them.

The earliest example of a recorded conversation that has surfaced so far was White House political operative Charles Colson's taping of a phone call he received

from former Florida Sen. George Smathers in the fall of 1971.

Smathers called to ask Colson's help in arranging parole for a Miami Beach client who was in prison. In a memo to John Dean, Colson said he turned on his recording device as soon as Smathers brought up the parole matter. Colson called the request "too hot for me to handle" and turned it over to Dean, who told the Senate committee about it last month.

Colson also recorded a phone call from E. Howard Hunt, one of the Watergate burglars, shortly after the November, 1972 election. Hunt was demanding money, and Colson brought the tape of the conversation to Dean, who eventually turned it over to the Senate committee.

In his own testimony, Dean acknowledged recording only one conversation. That was on March 29, when he talked on the phone to Peter Maroulis, the lawyer for Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy. Dean wanted Liddy to give a statement saying that Dean had no prior knowledge of the bugging, but Maroulis said Liddy wouldn't do it.