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Ehrlichman: A Casualty of Vietnam War

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In the present preoccupation with Watergate, John Ehrlichman's case is a reminder that another kind of poison affected America in recent years. It was the war, not Watergate, that brought Ehrlichman down.

As such, Ehrlichman is the latest in that long line of casualties from Vietnam. Not the combat from the front, of course, but the bitter conflicts at home that grew out of the war and divided the nation more sharply than any time in a century.

He was too old to wear a uniform when the war began back in the early '60s, but when circumstances propelled him to a position of power in Washington years later he and the rest of the President's men wore their patriotism like a badge.

They wore small American flags in their lapels wherever they went. It was more than a symbolic gesture: they seemed genuinely to believe their actions, however they stretched the law, were justified in defending the nation from enemies here and abroad.

In fact, by the time they came to power, the flag had become a symbol of national division instead of unity. The America they saw from the confines of their White House offices was an America in turmoil. Protesters and dissent and bombings and bitterness.

"No one who had been in the White House could help but feel he was in a state of siege," Tom Huston recalled of that period early in the Nixon administration when secret intelligence operations were put in motion in the name of national security. "They were dumping on you from all sides. It seemed that no one ever liked what was done in Vietnam."

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Ehrlichman and the others knew what the war had done to their immediate predecessors. It had destroyed Lyndon Johnson, torn his party in two, and was threatening to engulf them.

When American ground forces were ordered into Cambodia in the spring of 1970, a wave of demonstrations swept the country here at home. At their height, the President appeared before a group of Pentagon employees and said: "You know, you see these bums, you know, blowing up the campuses. Listen, the boys on the college campuses today are the luckiest people in the world . . . and here they are burning up the books, storming around on this issue."

Days later, Kent State, four dead, and the nation in trauma. "This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy," the President said.

It was out of that context and state of mind that the Nixon administration began to take action to improve the gathering of domestic intelligence. They were themselves caught up in a climate of wartime, besieged and beleaguered and seeing themselves surrounded by enemies.

"Surreptitious entry"— a polite term for burglary — was proposed and approved at the White House.

Also approved were increased electronic eavesdropping operations on American citizens, employment of informants, and the illegal opening of mail. When the Pentagon Papers were leaked to the press, laying bare government secrets on Vietnam, the creation of the White House "plumbers" came as an almost inevitable outcome.

For John Ehrlichman, who had come out of Seattle as a real estate attorney and risen to one of the most powerful positions in the country, it was, it seems, easy to accept the old notion that the ends justified the means.

He was a believer in the President and his point of view. He was also a believer in our role in Vietnam.

He had served in the Army Air Corps during World War II, flew 26 bombing missions over Germany and had received the Distinguished Flying Cross. His own father had tried to enlist, but was rejected as too old, and then went to Canada in its air force where he lost his life in a plane crash.

Like millions of others of his generation, John Ehrlichman went to college on the GI bill. Those who knew him then remember him as hard-working, quiet, competent and possessed of a dry sense of humor.

"He was the last guy you consider capable of dishonesty, of unethically influencing a court," said one of his classmates, Paul McCloskey, now a Republican congressman from California.

But he became caught up in the clash of attitudes over the seemingly endless war, between the patriots and the traitors, the enemies and the righteous. He never seems to have questioned his role. He really was, it would appear, acting in the name of national security—and, by definition, the national interest.

He became a household name because of Watergate and Ellsberg and his merciless exposure before the television cameras. The portrait that emerged, in the minds of many, was not flattering. He was called arrogant, harsh, unfeeling, pompous, although Richard Nixon had referred to him as "my right arm."

As Mr. Nixon's chief of staff for domestic affairs, he wielded enormous influence in the life of Washington and the nation. Now he has fallen, still expressing confidence in his ultimate vindication, still confident that his actions were proper.

The prosecutor Wililam Merril, saw it in a different light, and proposed a different question for the jurors—and philosophically for John Ehrlichman.

Violations of constitutional rights against illegal searches cannot be condoned, he said. "This isn't patriotism, this is anarchy."

He also said:

"We fought a revolution to establish these rights. They cannot be violated by people who turn their backs and close their eyes."

The jury agreed.