

3 Sept 1977

Ehrlichman's Novel Comes to TV

by Karl E. Meyer

I'M wary of superlatives, suspicious of networks, and have no love for John Ehrlichman. But if I had a silk hat, I'd doff it to ABC for translating Ehrlichman's novel, *The Company*, into a 12-hour movie to be broadcast on six successive nights, September 6-11, from 9:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M. (EDT). Make a note of the dates because the film is sure to disrupt dinner parties as millions of viewers get a prime time education in political hardball as played by the White House, the CIA, and the FBI.

In the flood of words unloosed by Watergate, the most interesting question is often ignored. We have by now a fairly accurate notion of what happened, but the *why* persists as a riddle. The merit of Ehrlichman's novel, and of the film it has inspired, is that it offers a plausible key to the motives that unify and explain an otherwise mystifying mélange of break-ins, buggings, and bribes.

The title, *The Company*, defines Ehrlichman's thesis. The in-house phrase for the Central Intelligence Agency, it suggests the hermetic world of a powerful, largely unaccountable entity that has become a state within a state. Always, the interests of the Company come first, and in this respect the CIA is no different from the White House or the FBI.

Politics, as seen by Ehrlichman, is the collision of rival bureaucracies, each with its feudal overlord, its secret files, and its legacy of grudges. There are no heroes in Ehrlichman's pages, only victims and villains inhabiting a moral void. In spirit, *The Company* is closer to Machiavelli's *The Prince* than it is to the potboilers of Allen Drury. A unique document, written by an insider, it is in my opinion the single most revealing book about Watergate.

(Parenthetically, I was surprised by the deftness of Ehrlichman's pen—so convincing is his Oval Office dialogue that much of it has been used verbatim in the ABC dramatization. Where Ehrlichman falters, dismally, is in the bedroom: his lovers converse in Basic Drury.)

Such is the extraordinary property that ABC has acquired, reportedly for a less-than-astronomical sum. Ehrlichman had no part in the dramatization, which he will be seeing for the first time in a federal prison.

The new title bestowed by ABC is *Washington: Behind Closed Doors*—surely an uninspired substitution. But title aside, the film version does justice to the book, if the opening installment that I saw provides an accurate sample. Cast,



Robertson and Robards—"Victims and villains inhabiting a moral void."

script, and production are impressive, and the story moves as swiftly as a Washington-bound Metroliner. As in the novel, fiction rests on an armature of fact: the real-life counterparts of the main figures are readily identifiable. Monckton is Nixon, Curry is Kennedy, and Anderson is Johnson—disguises about as subtle as the red wig Howard Hunt once borrowed from the CIA.

The first episode ends with a memorable line spoken by President-elect Richard Monckton, who is graceless in victory on election night. He confides to a Haldeman-like aide, "Let's figure out which of Curry's Ivy League faggots we can throw out on their ass—now!" (Expletives from the novel are otherwise deleted, but this salty line got by the censors and is crucial in defining the tone behind closed doors.)

Monckton is brilliantly played by Jason Robards, previously seen on the other side of the political fence as the editor of *The Washington Post* in *All the President's Men*. With ecumenical skill, Robards catches all the oddities of our oddest Chief Executive—the light-switch smile, the morose self-pity, and the sudden, jerky arm movements. Curry (i.e., Kennedy) is already dead when the story begins, his successor being Esker Scott Anderson, who, like Lyndon Johnson, has withdrawn from the presidential race after a New Hampshire primary. LBJ's mannerisms are mimed with equal accuracy by Andy Griffith, an inspired casting choice.

The third man in the plot is CIA director William Martin (Cliff Robertson), who is modeled in part on Richard Helms. Martin is high on the hit list of Ivy League faggots that President-elect Monckton is determined to purge from Washington. As CIA director, Martin is custodian of a devastating secret report implicating himself and the agency in the murder of foreign leaders. Both to save his career and to protect the CIA, Martin forms a covert alliance with Carl Tessler (Harold Gould), the Kissinger character, who is appointed head of the National Security Council. Pitted against the CIA is the director of the FBI, Elmer Morse (Thayer David), who is the very image of J. Edgar Hoover.

The conflict between these men forms the stuff of Ehrlichman's novel, and the story is faithfully replicated on television. There are cosmetic changes: Tessler, for example, is an Austrian-born Harvard professor in *The Company*; on television, he has been given a new birthplace—safely neutral Switzerland—and comes to Washington from a fictitious California think tank.

More substantially, a dozen new subplots have been inserted in order to fill 12 hours of air time, and these additions cause me some worry. In the first episode, we encounter a cherub-faced Monckton volunteer, Adam Gardiner (Tony Bill), who works for the equivalent of CREEP under Myron Dunn (John Houseman).

My early-warning systems flashed red when Adam surfaced on the screen: he seemed to be a gratuitous sop to network pressure to include a sympathetic good guy for the corn belt vote.

David Rintels, who coauthored the script with Eric Bercovici, assures me that such is not the case. The test will be in the viewing. When it comes to the networks, I am as paranoid as any character in *The Company*.

Washington: Behind Closed Doors will, I am certain, be as controversial as *Roots* and may rival that ABC series in the ratings. Many Americans may be repelled by what they see and question whether any useful purpose is served by rewashing dirty linen. The classic answer has been given by Lord Acton, who too often is remembered only for a single famous line.

Acton was a Catholic and a believer in historical truth. His celebrated sentence was prompted by a five-volume history of the papacy that Acton felt was too lenient in its treatment of errant popes. In 1887, he sent the author (Mandell Creighton) a letter in which he had written:

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority. . . . There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.

Ehrlichman's novel and the television drama based upon it are extended glosses of this Actonian precept. I believe that together they serve the national interest, in every sense, by compelling us to face the realities of power, even in the guise of fiction. By writing *The Company*, Ehrlichman has to an extent redeemed himself; by filming it, ABC is to an extent redeeming commercial television.

Indeed, the quality of *Washington: Behind Closed Doors* confirms what the severest critics of television have been saying—the talent for turning out first class programs exists. The resources are available for improving programming quality; what has been lacking is network imagination, will, and courage. How ironic that John Ehrlichman should point the way to improving the program content of a national medium so detested by Richard M. Nixon! ©