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The New Watergate Tapes

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When a prisoner hears that a court will consider reducing his sentence if he says, "I'm sorry, I won't let it happen again," the odds are that he'll say it. H. R. Haldeman has now said it, on a tape, naturally played in Federal court in Washington: "I have . . . a very strong feeling of repentance and strong feelings that whatever wrongs were done will never be repeated by me." John Mitchell says it, on another tape: "My reflections have led me to considerable remorse and regret . . . no set of circumstances, whatever they might be, will ever again lead me to take such actions or to perform such deeds."

Never mind the grudging ("whatever wrongs were done") or passive ("by me") aspects of the Haldeman tape or the somewhat pathetic insistence ("whatever they might be") of the Mitchell statement: Few will begrudge them the chance for early release. The important thing is that they were convicted and went to prison at all. As for the future, confession may be good for the soul but their pledges don't make much difference to the nation. The convicted Watergate conspirators are hardly likely ever again to serve as high counselors.

The more interesting tape was that of their co-con-

spirator, John Ehrlichman. It was unquestionably self-justifying in relation to Richard Nixon. Last May, Mr. Nixon told David Frost that firing his two chief aides was like cutting off one arm and then the other. "Maybe I defended them too long . . . I felt that they in their hearts felt they were not guilty." A generous President sticking with guilty aides. Now, Mr. Ehrlichman suggests that it was he who held on too long, seeing himself as a "better angel" determined, by staying in office, to "try and make things turn out better" A loyal aide sticking with a guilty President.

There is a more important quality to the Ehrlichman tape. He, too, says he's sorry and won't let it happen again. But he also hopes no one will ever let it happen again—and he offers useful counsel for future White House staff members. A Presidential aide, he observes, is an extension of the President's arm; it is not easy to exercise independent judgment. But if what a President wants creates a moral dilemma, then there is only one answer: "Get out." In other words, there are times when the arm should cut itself off, a taped lesson worth remembering in a society which prizes being ruled by laws and not men.