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John, Martha... United Again?

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WASHINGTON — Washington is all aflutter over Martha Mitchell's latest escapade.

When we last left Martha, she was in seclusion in a plush country club in upstate New York. She had departed California in a huff after a security guard allegedly pulled her phone off the wall. Martha didn't like losing her telephone.

Will John Mitchell reconcile his differences with his wife? Will Martha mend her ways? We couldn't reach the Mitchells for comment. But intimates have helped us put together the story of the nation's most talked-about marriage.

John and Martha Mitchell were married in December 1957. It wasn't a big wedding. The bride didn't wear a long white dress.

They exchanged vows in Elkton, Md., a rather seedy border town, then known for its quickie marriages. The bridegroom had been divorced in Reno on Dec. 19. The bride got her divorce three months earlier in Miami.

John's first wife, Betty, was cooperative. "John just walked in one morning and asked for a divorce," she confided to friends.

Martha's first husband, Clyde Jennings Jr., had a rougher time in divorce court. Martha accused him of beating her and carrying on with other women.

But at one point in the proceedings, William Poler, a private detective hired by Martha, testified that she "was neurotic. Excuse the expression. She was sick and all mixed up."

Clyde Jennings confirms, at least, that Martha was volatile.

"She would have a few drinks and then talk down to people," he recalls. Her habit of making late night phone calls is also rooted in the past. "It was neighborhood stuff then," recalls Jennings. "Now she has a national forum."

The marriage lasted 11

years. They had one son, Jay, whom Jennings claims was neglected as a teen-ager by Martha. Like many children of divorced parents, Jay became entangled in a web of bitterness. His father claims that, at 16, Jay left his mother and came to live with him with 48 cavities in his teeth.

Says Clyde Jennings: "That was about the time Martha was spending \$4,000 to have all her teeth capped." Jay, now 25 and a Vietnam veteran, has reconciled with his mother.

For John and Martha Mitchell, meanwhile, life was pleasant. A daughter, Marty, was born. They moved often in the early years of marriage, but they usually nested within the lush confines of Westchester and Fairfield counties in suburban New York. Martha had many friends among the card-playing matrons of the community.

When the Mitchells came to Washington, Martha received a warm welcome from the press. The Nixon cabinet wives were a drab collection of hausfraus who echoed worn-out phrases about "helping the Nixon team" and "community involvement."

Martha Mitchell, alone, stood out. She had color, a sense of humor and could always be depended upon for a wisecrack.

She took her publicity seriously and began speaking out on national issues. Her outbursts became an embarrassment to the Nixon Administration. Yet, her rhetoric was cheered by many Americans. Huge amounts of mail arrived at her Watergate apartment following each new antic. Most of it was warm and enthusiastic. Even President Nixon once egged her on.

John Mitchell talked over his marital problems this week with the President. Intimates say the President was understanding and urged him to straighten things out with Martha. It remains to be seen, however, whether she will get her telephone back.