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The Mitchell-Ehrlichman Turnabout

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By brilliant and determined investigative reporting, President Nixon has finally been driven to lance the Watergate ulcer. The pus can now be expected to flow rapidly, nastily and voluminously. But at least one can hope for the eventual end of what may justly be called Washington's Watergate phase—when nobody here could talk of anything else.

It has little to do with the heart of the matter. But one of the climatic episodes in this strange business also has its own vivid interest, because of the light it casts upon certain aspects of the American political scene. In partic-

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ular, it tells you a lot about what it must be like to live in the very dynamo of power, which is always the White House in Washington.

To see the stage, one must begin by noting the peculiar relationships that used to exist between leading members of the White House staff and former Attorney General John Mitchell, in the days when Mrs. Mitchell's husband was the most powerful man in Washington except for the President himself. In brief, Mitchell liked H. R. Haldeman. He tolerated Dr. Henry A. Kissinger. And he detested John Ehrlichman.

Mitchell was, and no doubt is, a man little given to concealing his likes and dislikes. At a fairly large dinner table, he once got onto the subject of Ehrlichman. The President's White House staff man for domestic problems was much too far to the left, said Mitchell in his carrying, emphatic voice. Somewhat arrogantly, the then-Attorney

General added that “we” were going to get rid of Ehrlichman after the election. “Ehrlichman,” he declared loudly, “is going to go.”

This was when Mitchell still wielded enormous authority, or at least appeared to do so. It was also when Watergate was nothing but a strikingly ugly apartment house, with ceilings as low as the rents are high. Mitchell's semi-public condemnation of a leading White House staff member naturally caused a lot of talk. So Ehrlichman was eventually asked about what Mitchell had said.

“He'll go before I do,” Ehrlichman replied drily.

The stage is now set, and we move onward to April 15. That was the day when the President requested his 1968 campaign manager, his former Attorney General, and above all, his former second-in-command in all but name, to report for a meeting at the White House. One can imagine John Mitchell's mood—maybe a bit grumpy because of the Sunday rendezvous, for he is naturally grumpy; maybe just a bit apprehensive; but basically and overwhelmingly self-confident.

If this is the correct reading, the apprehensiveness must have shot upward, and a lot of the self-confidence must have seeped, too, away as soon as Mitchell entered the White House. For at the White House entrance, this man who used to be the only member of the Cabinet able to see the President without permission from Bob Haldeman, was quietly told the President would not see him on this occasion. Instead, John Ehrlichman was waiting for him.

As a case of “how are the mighty fallen!” this was worthy of history's greatest student of the singularities of court life, the Duc de Saint Simon. Nonetheless, John Mitchell went to see John Ehrlichman, whose early destruction Mitchell had all but publicly

vowed to contrive. Inquiry at the time merely revealed that the President had asked Ehrlichman to give Mitchell “a message.”

Within a few hours, however, it became glaringly apparent that this “message” Ehrlichman had been requested to deliver was the news that another figure in the Watergate case, Jeb Stuart Magruder, had begun singing like a canary. Furthermore, Magruder had implicated Mitchell, although Mitchell had told the President he was not implicated in any way.

It was a way of telling Mitchell, in truth—and through the mouth of an enemy at that—that he could no longer expect White House protection. For Mitchell, it was done privately whereas for the President's former counsel, John Dean, it was done in public, and by a press secretary. It should be added that just as Dean has

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publicly sworn to fight back, so Mitchell also reportedly swore to fight—and in unvarnished language—in his bad quarter hour with Ehrlichman.

Reflect upon the human nuances of all these twists and turnings. You will then understand the advice that an exceptionally successful departing British ambassador gave to his successor. “You want to know what to read about Washington,” said Lord Halifax. “Well, I suppose I should read Saint Simon's ‘Memories.’ The White House is what matters most; and the White House is really a court.”