

Nixon Aides' Counsel

John Johnston Wilson

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By JAMES T. WOOTEN APR 30 1973

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WASHINGTON, April 29—By his own careful accounting, there are but three loves in John Johnston Wilson's well-ordered life: a woman named Alice, a dog named Vicki and the passionate practice of law. "But not necessarily in that order," the chunky, pink-faced, 71-year-old attorney harumphed in his office here last week. Yet, whatever may be his more constant priorities within that rather narrow triangle, it seems reasonable to expect that in the next few weeks Mr. Wilson's newest clients—John D. Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, top aides to President Nixon—may reduce the woman, his wife for nearly half a century, and the dog, a precocious but nervous Boston Terrier, to clearly subordinate roles.

"I'm reluctant to admit it, but that's probably true," Mr. Wilson said with very little reluctance. "Ah, but what the hell? They've known me a long time. I think they'll understand."

So, it might be added, would almost everyone else who has been acquainted with Mr. Wilson for any length of time, either casually, socially or professionally. In law offices all over this city, his friends and enemies, colleagues and associates agree almost unanimously that the one thing to be said about him after everything else has been said is that he works harder than any other lawyer they've ever seen.

"It's almost as though he were trying to get his practice established," remarked one of the lawyers who works at Whiteford, Hart, Carmody & Wilson, the venerable firm depleted by the death of the first three partners, but that is "just as strong as ever with Mr. Wilson in the driver's seat."

Yet, Mr. Wilson's practice, enriched over a span of nearly 50 years by a variety of notable cases and hundreds that never caught the public eye, has been firmly affluent for as long as anyone can remember, providing him with quite a comfortable way of life.

"I've pointed that out to him," Mrs. Alice Adelaide Grant Wilson said, "but he still goes at it like we were both young again."

The couple was married in September, 1923, two years after he had finished law school at George Washington University, and a few months after he had passed his District of Columbia bar examinations and been admitted to the bar. He first entered private practice, then became an Assistant United States Attorney, and in 1940 he joined the firm in which he is now the senior partner.

Mr. Wilson represented a Swiss concern whose American assets had been seized by the United States Government during World War II because of its asserted relationship to the Nazi-Controlled, German chemical cartel of I. G. Farben—and after more than 20 years, the case was settled to his client's benefit.

He defended an Assistant Attorney General under President Truman against Republican charges of conflict of interest and won a directed acquittal—not long after he had represented a steel company's successful fight against Mr. Truman's attempt to take over the industry to prevent increased prices.

Later he helped Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, win a libel suit against Ralph Ginzburg, the magazine publisher—and through all the years and all the cases, he earned a reputation with lawyers, judges and clients as a man who always knew exactly what he was doing.

"He has an incisive intelligence," a junior member of his firm said. Mr. Wilson is "disarming, though" he added, "charming, courtly, usually smiling, quite soft-spoken, but with a steel trap for a mind and an instinct for the jugular."

With no hobbies and a disciplined, almost ascetic life style, Mr. Wilson closely resembles the two men at the White House—Mr. Ehrlichman and Mr. Haldeman—who have hired him to look after their interests as the Watergate scandal spreads.

Like him, they have a deep commitment to an unvarnished work ethic and, like him, they lean to the starboard side of the political ship.

One of Mr. Wilson's fellow lawyers here described his politics as being "to the right of McKinley," the conservative Republican President



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Reputation for knowing what he's doing

who died nearly two months after Mr. Wilson was born on July 25, 1901.

"Damned right I am," Mr. Wilson acknowledged. "I'm a conservative Republican who hasn't approved of any conservative Republicans in years because most conservative Republicans aren't conservative enough for me."

Nevertheless, he insists, over the years he has stayed out of politics—until now, that is, for the men he now represents are at the center of the political swirls of the executive branch.

"It's funny, though, how you get your business," Mr. Wilson remarked.

"I never met these two gentlemen and one day the phone rang and there they were on the line and all of a sudden I had two new clients."

How, he was asked, had that come about.

"I suppose," he said, "they wanted a good lawyer."