

The Baffling Behavior of John Mitchell

John Mitchell denied to federal investigators three weeks ago that he had any role in the 1969-70 national security wiretaps despite documentary evidence that he approved them, piling new riddles on top of the mystery over both his past and future role in the Watergate scandal.

Mitchell's denial lacks all plausible explanation. Nor is it the first time that Mitchell's denial of Watergate-connected events have been contradicted by facts which had to be known to him. Thus, investigators in both the Justice Department and the Senate wonder about the value of his future testimony, a growing doubt that could play into President Nixon's hands if Mitchell attacks him.

In private conversations, Mitchell gives the impression both of confusion and of a desire to tell all. Combined with the questions of his credibility, Mitchell—once the strongman of the Nixon administration—now becomes a dangerous unknown in the Watergate mess.

That was shown by his strange conduct in the FBI's routine investigation of the 17 or so national security wiretaps. Attempting to find the then-missing wiretap files, FBI agents interviewed Mitchell in New York in mid-May. He not only denied any knowledge of the taps but said flatly he had not approved them.

But when the files shortly thereafter were located in a White House safe, the FBI noted that John Mitchell's approval was signed to them. Could it have been a Justice Department clerk duplicating the Attorney General's signature? FBI officials personally familiar with Mitchell's signature said

absolutely no. Moreover, some of the wiretap requests contained marginal notes unmistakably penciled in by Mitchell.

To make sure, the FBI called in handwriting experts to test the signatures. Their verdict: they were signed by the real John Mitchell.

At about the same time, Mitchell was saying, "I don't know what the hell he's talking about," in response to an allegation by a former aide that Atty. Gen. Mitchell had asked him to contact Supreme Court justices to protest an anti-wiretap decision. Mitchell's earlier denials under oath that he played a role in the 1972 campaign before resigning as Attorney General, farcical on its face, has been contradicted by other sworn testimony. He has amended his previous sworn denials of any prior knowledge of the Watergate burglary. And he has been indicted for lying in the Vesco case.

Now, Mitchell seems eager to get on the witness stand to talk. Taking up habits made famous by his wife, he has placed late evening telephone calls—not to newsmen but to friends—to indicate that desire. But it is not clear what he wants to say. In fact, some of these friends have described him as "rattled"—about as far as he could get from the Mitchell of old.

One Mitchell associate believes his agitated state of mind was set off by a private telephone call from a newspaper correspondent telling Mitchell that ex-presidential aide John D. Ehrlichman, never a friend, was going to implicate him deeply in the Watergate scandal. After that, Mitchell told the UPI's Helen Thomas over the telephone that somebody was trying to

make him "the fall guy" in the scandal.

According to one Nixon intimate, none of this is surprising. He contends that Mitchell, contrary to his strongman reputation, habitually would deny on Tuesday what he said Monday in the administration's inner councils. "John Mitchell's problem is that he can't remember what he says," contends this presidential adviser.

But he had always been a rival of Mitchell. Friendlier sources are baffled by Mitchell's present demeanor. Republican politicians regarded him as a straight talker who certainly did remember what he said from one day to the next and vastly preferred him to President Nixon's haughty personal aides.

Indeed, one high-level Republican who has known Mitchell well for years feels he has changed tremendously in recent weeks. While Mitchell has been losing his grip, he says, his wife Martha has been playing a cool and long-headed game against the White House. Despite Mitchell's own public statements professing the President's innocence, Mrs. Mitchell has subtly warned "Mr. President" that, if her husband is made the Watergate scapegoat, "Mr. President" is going to seriously damage himself.

The demise of hard-nosed John Mitchell, from his inexplicable denials of provable facts to his wife's implicit threats against the President, has bewildered and saddened Republican politicians. They had regarded him as a political sanctuary when the Halde- man-Ehrlichman palace guard spurned them. Now, Mitchell has become one of the most combustible, uncertain elements in the Watergate disaster.