

Mitchell Tells His Role in The Watergate Cover-Up He Says He Withheld Information From Nixon To Get Him Re-elected

Washington

John N. Mitchell swore yesterday that he had deliberately withheld information from President Nixon about the Watergate bugging, the coverup and "White House horror stories" to prevent any damage to the President's bid for re-election.

"Maybe in retrospect," the former attorney general told the Senate Watergate Investigating Committee, "I was wrong, but it occurred to me that the best thing to do was just to keep the lid on through the election."

In day-long testimony — which he gave with an air of relaxed assurance — Mitchell persistently denied that he had authorized the political intelligence-gathering scheme that led to the Watergate break-in in June, 1972.

QUESTIONS

He conceded, under sharp and occasionally skeptical interrogation, that he had joined in efforts to "limit the impact" of Watergate on the election campaign and, later, on Mr. Nixon's presidency.

He suggested that others had been involved in the coverup or that White House officials had pressed for approval of the bugging of the Democratic party's offices at the Watergate apartment-office complex. But he repeatedly said he had no first-hand knowledge to support his suspicions.

He acknowledged that his certainty about Mr. Nixon's innocence of involvement in either the break-in scheme or the coverup was predicated "solely on my association with the President" and not on any direct knowledge.

ROLE

Mitchell sought, furthermore, to minimize his own role in the coverup. He flatly denied allegations made by previous witnesses, particularly John W. Dean III, the former White House legal

counsel, and Jeb Stuart Magruder, who had been Mitchell's deputy at the committee for the re-election of the President. At one point, he called a sworn statement by Magruder "a palpable, damnable lie."

Throughout the five hours that Mitchell spent at the witness table he strove to color the testimony or earlier witnesses in a different light, and he frequently professed an absence of recollection about key events described in previous testimony.

Mitchell told the senators, the audience in the ornate hearing room and television

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viewers across the nation that he never had discussed his knowledge of illegal campaign activities with Mr. Nixon, even at a luncheon the day before Mitchell resigned, on July 1, 1972, from his post as campaign director.

'FEAR'

When five individuals arrested at the Watergate apartment and office complex two weeks earlier had been traced to the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, the former attorney general said, "We all had an innate fear" that the criminal investigation would uncover prior questionable activities conducted on behalf of the White House.

He said that these activities included such "horror stories" as the involvement of White House officials in the 1971 burglary of the office of a California psychiatrist treating Daniel Ellsberg; the "spiriting" out of

Washington of Dita D. Beard, a controversial lobbyist from the International Telephone and Telegraph Co.; a fake cable purporting to link John F. Kennedy to the death of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and "extracurricular" eavesdropping.

CAMPAIGN

Mitchell testified that he withheld such information — all of which he insisted he learned only after the Watergate burglary — to protect his friend, the President.

"I did not believe," Mitchell told the Senate panel's majority counsel, Samuel Dash, "that it was appropriate for him to have that type of knowledge, because I knew the actions that he would take (to punish the wrongdoers) and it would be most detrimental to his political campaign."

Similarly, the former law enforcement official testified, he withheld the information from Mr. Nixon after the President had been re-elected because "it would not affect his election but it would affect his Presidency."

HINDSIGHT

In hindsight, he remarked more than once, his judgment may have been faulty. And when Senator Herman E. Talmadge (Dem-Ga.), asked Mitchell late in the afternoon if he had not put "the expediency of the election" above his responsibility to the President, Mitchell replied:

"In my mind, the re-election of Richard Nixon, compared to what was available on the other side, was so much more important that, yes, I would put it just that way."

Scattered boos and hisses reverberated off the marble walls of the hearing room as the audience reacted to the statement.

Dash, who questioned the former attorney general for two hours, kept asking why Mitchell had not taken legal action, or at least dismissed G. Gordon Liddy, when the former campaign official kept recommending scaled-down versions of a plan for illegal wiretapping and other intelligence-gathering methods early in 1972.

'MISH-MASH'

Mitchell said that the \$1

million scheme that Liddy outlined at a January 27 meeting in the attorney general's office "can best be described as a complete horror story that involved a mish-mash of code names, and lines of authority, electronic surveillance, the ability to intercept aircraft communications, the call-girl bit and all the rest of it."

He added that he had told Liddy — who later was convicted in the Watergate conspiracy — to burn charts describing the proposal and concentrate instead on gathering information that would help to protect the President's candidacy from demonstrators.

"Since you were the attorney general of the United States, why didn't you throw Mr. Liddy out of your office?" Dash inquired.

"Well, I think, Mr. Dash, in hindsight I not only should have thrown him out of the office, I should have thrown him out of the window," Mitchell answered.

Mitchell, whose testimony was salted with witticisms and occasional references to his wife, Martha, who was not present, smiled as the hearing room filled with laughter.

But minutes later he said that he had to "violently disagree" with the testimony given earlier by Magruder that Mitchell had at a second meeting on a \$500,000 Liddy program in February, called for a less expensive surveillance campaign and specifically called for targeting it on the Democratic National Committee offices.

The witness steadfastly denied as well Magruder's account of a March 30 meeting in Key Biscayne, Fla., at which Magruder said under oath that the then Attorney General had given reluctant approval to a \$250,000 version of the plan. He said that Frederick C. Larue, another aide, might verify that he told Magruder, "we don't need this, I am tired of hearing it, out, let's not discuss it any further."

Mitchell insisted that he was surprised when the Watergate burglary was disclosed and that he could only "presume" that there had been "other people interested in the implementation" of the Liddy scheme who had persuaded Magruder to put it into effect.

He said he did not know

directly who they might have been, but that the "wide-ranging testimony" of earlier witnesses might enable the committee to "take your pick."

Magruder and John W.

Dean III, the former White House legal counsel who charged last month that Mr. Nixon was actively involved in the coverup, have testified that Charles W. Colson,

a former special counsel to the President, had pressed for approval of the Liddy plan.

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FORMER ATTORNEY GENERAL JOHN MITCHELL
He appeared before Senate committee