

Where's Martha? John

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The Senate Watergate committee had other questions for him, but the one question asked John Mitchell by reporters before yesterday's hearing was, "Where's Martha?"

The wife of the former attorney general and former presidential confidant has repeatedly said she wants to testify herself—"I can't wait to get up on the Hill and tell them what I know"—but she stayed away from her husband's Watergate committee debut.

Asked if he had been afraid his wife would upstage him, Mitchell cracked, "This is one occasion when you don't mind being upstaged."

But Martha, the former darling of the Nixon administration, who was applauded in bygone days by the President ("Give 'em hell, Martha," he once said) as she stood up on her stiletto-heeled sling-backs and let fly at his critics, is now somewhere out of sight.

Her husband wasn't about to say where. Is she in New York? "She's in heaven—like all angels are," he deadpanned. Standing by the witness table, with a half grin on his face, a bantering Mitchell fended off questions for 15 minutes, but his hands were not in synchronization with his flip remarks. As he twisted an empty matchbook, his hands shook noticeably.

The questions poured out: Is she in Washington? Smile—and then, "I hope not."

Why isn't she here? "Because she decided to stay away." Why? "I don't know why." Mitchell, to another inquiry, said, "She didn't come because they didn't have the right kind of TV sets" (referring to a story that she had been offered a private Senate room and TV set to view her husband's testimony). A late arriving reporter pushed through the crowd and asked the momentous question again, "Is Mrs. Mitchell in town?" "She's in town—but not in Washington."

Is she still in the south? (Mrs. Mitchell reportedly went south last week to see friends.) "With that accent, she'll always be in the south."

Mitchell said he talked to his wife, famous for her midnight phone calls to the

press, Monday night on the phone after he had dinner with his lawyers at Trader Vic's.

Would he have liked her support yesterday? "I don't mind her supporting me—but I don't think she can make any money here." He added, "I would always prefer she do what she'd like to."

Throughout the spring, there were stories that Mrs. Mitchell was drinking heavily and in May, Time magazine said that Mrs. Mitchell was reported to have been hospitalized after a nervous breakdown. Mrs. Mitchell

heatedly denied that to the New York Times—"Anybody who says that, why they're just as crazy as can be." Mitchell yesterday denied any suggestion that his wife was being restrained from appearing by him or anyone. "I've never seen her refrain from doing anything she wanted to."

An Arkansas Gazette editorial said that while Mrs. Mitchell wasn't as good looking as Mrs. John Dean, she was giving her husband better advice. Mitchell was asked what he thought of that. "What do I think of what? Dean's wife?"

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And so it went. Mitchell also ducked all questions about the Watergate—"I have had no comment in the past and I'm not about to start now."

Mrs. Mitchell said in 1970 of the President, "He'll kill me when I say it, but it's almost a fatherly love."

But this year, in her recent telephone calls, she said the President was surrounded by a pack of "liars," that he ought to resign, that her husband was protecting him, and that there were attempts to make "my John" the "fall guy."

Has Mitchell talked to the President lately, he was asked. He answered with, "President who?"

Does his wife still feel the President should resign? don't know that she said that. I always said that got garbled in the transcribing."

A spokesman for the Watergate committee said yesterday that no decision has been made yet about calling Mrs. Mitchell to testify. Two weeks ago Sam Dash, majority counsel, said Mrs. Mitchell may be called to testify "by popular demand."