

# Mitchell Inquiry Brings Talk of Power and Truth

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WASHINGTON, July 11—What makes John N. Mitchell different in the Watergate cast is his strong implication that he would play his part much the same way again.

He does not, of course, admit the role that others have attributed to him in planning the Watergate burglary. He wishes he had thrown the original schemers out of his fifth-floor Justice Department window. But once the deed was done, the onetime Attorney General today reiterated, under tough questioning, his countenancing of perjury, payments to the buttoned-up criminal defendants, and secrets from the President were all justified by reasons of state.

Specifically, he said, "I still believe that the most important thing to this country was the re-election of Richard Nixon."

None of the four Democrats on the Senate Watergate committee asked Mr. Mitchell what he found so absolutely unacceptable about the Democratic alternatives—including, in the prenomination days of the Watergate raid, Senators Hubert H. Humphrey, Edmund S. Muskie and George McGovern, the eventual nominee. And none of the three Republicans on the committee probed his thoughts on the indispensability of Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Mitchell's position, so

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different from the repentance of the younger campaign aides who preceded him to the witness stand, led the hearings into new territory. The almost philosophical discussion, led by Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the Tennessee Republican, was how power—and in this case, truth—could be kept from the President by his first assistants.

With many factual questions—who said what to whom, and when—unresolved, the subject today, in Senator Baker's phrase, was "your perception of the Presidency," the demands of honesty, and in various forms, political morality.

The view that Mr. Mitchell still stands by is that the truth of "the broad Watergate affair" was too dreadful for President Nixon to know. Even a little information, Mr. Mitchell said this morning, would have impelled the President to reveal all and endanger his political survival.

And thus, he suggested, the web of denials and cover-up stories, in which Mr. Mitchell admits he took an active part last summer, was woven not only to deceive the voting public but also to protect the President from himself.

## 'I Believe I Was Right'

"To this day," Mr. Mitchell said, "I believe that I was right in not involving the President in any of these subject matters, because obviously, he would have had to take very strong action, which would have been to the detriment of the campaign that was being run on his behalf."

Senator Daniel K. Inouye, Democrat of Hawaii, cited to Mr. Mitchell the recent White House memo arguing that the full story, quickly disclosed, was "the kind of embarrassment that an immensely popular President could have easily weathered."

Mr. Mitchell flatly disagreed, he said, because the truth of Watergate would have led irreversibly to the "White House horrors"—his phrase for such actions as the burglary of the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist—and would have forced an election-year purge of the President's top staff.

## A Reluctant Witness

Mr. Mitchell, appearing under subpoena against his will, was a reluctant witness again in his second day before the committee, volunteering almost as little information now as he volunteered to the President and the public during the campaign. His rationale, and his "perception of the Presidency," is a labyrinth that none of his interrogators penetrated completely.

This afternoon he commented that he had spoken to Mr. Nixon by phone only hours after G. Gordon Liddy first outlined his \$1-million espionage plan, involving wiretaps, burglary, mugging and prostitution to entrap Democratic poli-

ticians—a scheme that he now suspects had high-level White House backers. But he never mentioned the matter to the President, he said, in deference to the unwritten rule that

Presidents, not their assistants, set the conversational agenda.

Paradoxes abounded in his account. Presidents should be shielded, he said, from "all of the mundane problems that go on from day to day," and also, in the case of Watergate, from "matters that bore directly upon his election."

He had found no basis in the Constitution, he admitted, for keeping such critical information from the President. His authority, rather, was his "judgment"; some judgments "in hindsight are quite improper, obviously," he conceded. But this judgment, he concluded, may have been both improper and vital.

In that sense, Mr. Mitchell accepted substantial responsibility for the cover-up. Yet he also maintained that with respect to Watergate, there was no cover-up at all. "Watergate was out," he tried to explain in reference to the break-in at the Democratic National headquarters. "The White House horror stories were not out."

## Colson Role Hinted

More clearly than ever today, "horror stories" is Mr. Mitchell's code phrase for a variety of deeds attributed to an old rival in the Nixon power structure, Charles W. Colson, the former special counsel to the President.

He never names Mr. Colson as a special villain. Pressed by reporters to identify the source of the "horrors," he refers only

to "the little man," and sometimes to "little snakes or cats."

But when Senators asked him today to identify the "horrors," he mentioned mainly items that Mr. Colson is said to have inspired. Such as the falsification of diplomatic cables bearing on the assassination of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem; the secret mission of E. Howard Hunt Jr. in a red wig, to visit Dita D. Beard, a lobbyist for the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation, and the proposal, never carried out, to fire-bomb the Brookings Institution.

He seemed to be saying that his own transgressions—if that is what they were—pale by comparison. But the Senators did not appear interested in such a defense—especially from the man they pointedly addressed as "the former chief law officer of the United States."

Mr. Mitchell himself did not look happy with his account of events today. He was still talking tough, proposing at one point that it might have been simpler to have shot the White House staff, and not have bothered with a cover-up. But at the end of the day, his hands were still trembling, his head was sagging, and his eyes were watering under the television lights.