

Walter Pincus

Watergate Questions

Perhaps it is because of the impending constitutional fight over the Nixon White House tapes. Or perhaps it is the rush to get this phase of the hearings over, or the fact that former White House aide John Ehrlichman offers such a broad target. But whatever the reason, the possibility exists that the long awaited appearances of Ehrlichman and former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman before the Ervin committee may come and go without the men closest to the President being pinned down on dates, times and subjects of meetings in a way that will permit sorting out already conflicting testimony.

Haldeman's aide Gordon Strachan testified he was told by Haldeman's chief aide on June 18, 1972, the day after the break-in, that Ehrlichman was handling the Watergate matter of the

The writer is associate editor of The New Republic.

White House. John Dean testified that on June 19, Ehrlichman "instructed me to find out what I could and report back to him." Was Strachan's information correct, as supported by Dean's testimony? What assignment did Ehrlichman have in the first days after the break-in? And who gave him that assignment?

Dean testified he told Ehrlichman, on the morning of June 19, of his call from re-election campaign deputy director Jeb S. Magruder, in which Magruder identified G. Gordon Liddy as the director of the break-in. Later that day, Dean said he reported to Ehrlichman on his interview of Liddy, in which Liddy had talked of Magruder pushing him into the second break-in. What recollection does Ehrlichman have of these two Dean reports? Did he tell the President that day of the involvement of Liddy and Magruder?

At 9 a.m. June 20, Ehrlichman, Campaign Director John Mitchell and Haldeman met to discuss Watergate. By then, Ehrlichman knew about Liddy and Magruder. Haldeman had, by then, ordered Strachan to "make sure his files were clean," a directive that led Strachan to destroy several papers on political intelligence including one from April which specifically referred to a \$300,000 sophisticated intelligence program, being put into operation. The third participant in the meeting, Mitchell, had been briefed by Magruder and Robert Mardian and was aware not only of the Liddy-Magruder roles but also of the fact that a prior break-in had occurred. At 9:45 a.m. that morning, the three were joined by Dean who had been told that E. Howard Hunt's safe had contained a suitcase with electronic bugging gear. What was discussed at that meeting?

When that session was over, Ehrlichman and Haldeman went to the Oval Office for a meeting with the President that lasted two and a half hours. Did the President ask either of them what they knew about Watergate?

Mitchell testified he first learned of the Ellsberg psychiatrist break-in, unauthorized wiretaps and other activities of Hunt and Liddy (which he labeled the White House horrors) after his aides, Frederick LaRue and Robert Mardian, interviewed Liddy. The exact time he received that report is in question. LaRue said it was the evening of June 20. Mardian said June 21. In either case, Mitchell was aware of that

7-27-73 w. b. s.
information on the morning of June 22. At 9 a.m. that day Ehrlichman met with Mitchell and White House aides Clark Magregor and Charles Colson. What was the substance of that meeting?

At 11:45, Ehrlichman and Mitchell met together. The two were never friends and this session must have been electric. Ehrlichman knew Mitchell subordinates were involved in Watergate, a blunder which could cost the election. Mitchell, on the other hand, knew that the two directors of the break-in, Hunt and Liddy, had both worked for a group — "the plumbers" — which operated under Ehrlichman's control. Mitchell now argues that the "horrors" committed by the plumbers, if exposed before the election, could

do more damage than Watergate. With those opposing views, what did the two of them discuss the morning of June 22?

The next day, June 23, marked the beginning of an effort to get the CIA to slow down, if not halt, at least one aspect of the FBI investigation into the break-in. At 1 p.m. Haldeman and Ehrlichman met with CIA Director Richard Helms and his top deputy, Lt. Gen. Vernon Walters. According to Walters' notes on the meeting, Haldeman termed the break-in a political embarrassment that he hoped could be limited if those involved were held to the five men arrested. Helms has testified his memory of the meetings follows along with Walters' notes. Ehrlich-

man has testified he was called to the meeting at the last minute and was not aware of its purposes beforehand. He was not asked to confirm Walters' characterization of Haldeman's statements. Ehrlichman also testified that at the June 23 meeting he and Haldeman told Helms and Walters, "... the White House contact on this would be John Dean who was the fellow following the entire matter." Asked if he was aware of what Dean later proposed to Walters, Ehrlichman replied, "I do not know about these conversations." The committee's minority counsel, Fred Thompson then asked, "Dean did not report back to you?" To which Ehrlichman replied, "Not about that, no sir."

Thompson did not pursue the matter. However a check of Dean's testimony and the Ehrlichman logs shows the following: On June 26, Dean called Walters to arrange a meeting and suggested the CIA official clear it with Ehrlichman if he had doubts about Dean's role. Walters did call Ehrlichman — though Ehrlichman has not been asked to confirm that call. Dean and Walters then met at 11:45 a.m. in Dean's office. At that meeting, according to both participants, Dean raised the possibility of the CIA paying both bond and support money to the Watergate burglars, then in jail. Walters refused. At 12:25 that day, apparently immediately after this meeting with Walters, Dean met with Ehrlichman. Did they discuss the session with Walters that had just concluded?

Two days later, June 28, Dean says Ehrlichman pushed him to raise the subject again with Walters. Ehrlichman's log shows a meeting at 10:45 a.m. that day. Dean met with Walters at 11:30 — the time originally set for a meeting with Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray III. Ehrlichman has testified he cancelled that meeting because he feared "leaks." Dean told Walters it was Ehrlichman's wish that future discussion take place directly between Walters and Gray — and avoid CIA Director Helms. Dean sought from Walters some suggestion as to how the FBI inquiry into Mexican checks that passed through one of the burglar's bank accounts could be delayed. Dean again met with Ehrlichman after this session with Walters. And 20 minutes after that meeting with Dean, Ehrlichman met with the President.

There is another area of questioning where Ehrlichman's testimony could be enlightening. On March 21 Dean testified, he told the President about the possible prior involvement in Watergate of Mitchell, Magruder and Strachan and also about the cover-up, which involved the President's closest White House advisers. Dean further testified that at meetings with the President on the afternoons of March 21 and March 22 — meetings attended by Ehrlichman — Dean saw no change in the past policy of cover-up. What is Ehrlichman's recollection of these meetings?

On March 28, Ehrlichman recorded a conversation with then Attorney General Richard Kleindienst. One subject brought up was the President's desire to be informed if any information was developed concerning Mitchell's involvement in the original bugging plan. When did the President ask Ehrlichman to make that request from the attorney general? Why did he want it?

With key witnesses such as Ehrlichman, the committee should concentrate initially on developing the facts, foregoing until later the temptation to debate constitutional issues.