

SEChronicle
Ehrlichman 'Can't Believe'
Nixon Was Told of Coverup

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He Says He Doubts
Dean Story

Washington

John D. Ehrlichman swore yesterday that he has great difficulty believing that President Nixon was briefed on the Watergate coverup before April 14 of this year.

The former presidential assistant, in his fourth day-long appearance before the Senate Watergate committee, challenged head-on the charge by John W. Dean III that President Nixon was personally involved in the coverup effort.

Ehrlichman testified that he had "great difficulty believing" the account by Dean, the deposed White House legal counsel, of a March 21 meeting at which Dean claimed to have warned Mr. Nixon that Watergate was "a cancer growing on the presidency."

Furthermore, Ehrlichman outlined — in cryptic handwritten notes of his own investigation into Watergate and in his testimony yesterday morning — a White House theory that the coverup was intended to mask the involvement of John N. Mitchell, former attorney general, in the intelligence plan that culminated in the Watergate break-in.

He said that H. R. Haldeman, then the White House chief of staff, had asked him if it was possible "we are taking all this anguish just to protect John Mitchell."

Ehrlichman did not volunteer any of his theories or conclusions about the conspiracy or the coverup. His rebuttal of Dean, Mitchell and at least six other previous witnesses at the hearings emerged, bit by bit, under solicitous interrogation by Senator Edward J. Gurney (Rep-Fla.) and somewhat more skeptical questioning by other committee members.

Moreover, the scribbled notes that Ehrlichman ex-

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plained in part contained a strong suggestion — which the Senate committee did not explore — that concern over the federal grand jury testimony of E. Howard Hunt, a convicted Watergate conspirator, had prompted Mr. Nixon's April 17 announcement of "serious" new charges in the Watergate case.

Ehrlichman confirmed to a reporter that his notes on an April 15 interview with Charles W. Colson, a former White House special counsel, reflected a recommendation by Colson that Mr. Nixon should publicly disclose "damaging evidence" so

that an upcoming grand jury appearance by Hunt would be an "anti-climax."

Although yesterday was Ehrlichman's fourth day before the seven senators, their aides, and the television cameras in the caucus room of the old Senate Office Building, not until yesterday morning did the committee focus in depth on Ehrlichman's knowledge of the Watergate case itself.

TESTIMONY

In reply to questions, Ehrlichman testified that he took over the White House inquiry into the Watergate case on March 30, that he interviewed a number of the principals, that he gave Mr. Nixon complete reports on April 14 and 15 and that the President had immediately ordered him to pass the information on to government investigators.

Ehrlichman said that the President told him on March 30 that he was "satisfied that John Dean is in this so deeply that he simply cannot any longer have anything to do with it."

That conversation would have occurred nine days after the March 21 meeting at which Dean said he sought unsuccessfully to persuade

the President that the coverup was unraveling and that it had to be ended.

MEETING

But Ehrlichman insisted yesterday that he had been

at a later March 21 meeting with the President, Dean and Haldeman, and that the President had given no indication that he had been briefed fully on Watergate by Dean.

Nor was there any such indication at a meeting the next day that included Mitchell, Ehrlichman said.

Gurney asked Ehrlichman:

"Did not the President say at any of these meetings, 'Now, listen fellows, here I have heard all about this

from John Dean — what gives here?'"

"Senator," replied Ehrlichman, "I have great difficulty in believing that the President was told what Dean says he was told because of the President's approach."

Ehrlichman said, "Now, I am forced to the assumption by the President's conduct that one of two things was taking place either he still confidently believed that the White House was without blame and that Mr. Mitchell was without blame, and was acting accordingly, or he was involved in setting a few snares on the trail and was playing it cool."

Dean testified last month that Mr. Nixon had told him early this year to report directly on Watergate matters because Haldeman and Ehrlichman were "principals" in the case.

But Gurney elicited from Ehrlichman the explanation that Mr. Nixon had not meant to suggest that the two senior White House officials had been implicated in the conspiracy or coverup.

To the contrary, Ehrlichman said, the President merely meant that he expected Haldeman and Ehrlichman to become "test cases, so to speak" on the issue of testimony by presidential assistants before a congressional committee.

"We were principals on the question of the availability of assistants to testify," Ehrlichman said.

He said that when he took on the assignment of determining in April whether there was any White House involvement in the coverup, he interviewed ten key individuals.

LIDDY

On April 5, Ehrlichman

contended, he learned for the first time of the meetings in early 1972 at which the political intelligence plans of G. Gordon Liddy, another Watergate conspirator, were hatched and trimmed to fit a \$250,000 budget.

Ehrlichman said that the information was given to him by Paul L. O'Brien, one of the attorneys for the Committee for the Re-election of the President, on the basis of O'Brien's own inquiries and first-hand information about the break-in and coverup.

O'Brien "brought me a whole new picture of this whole matter," Ehrlichman said, including the following elements:

- That the plans to bug the Democratic party offices in the Watergate complex were said by Jeb Stuart Magruder, the deputy campaign director, to have been approved by Mitchell — a charge that Mitchell has denied.

- That Hunt supervised another intelligence operation that obtained information from agents planted in the headquarters of Democratic presidential contenders.

- That Magruder had warned O'Brien that the scandal could lead to the President. Ehrlichman said this was based on a comment allegedly made by Gordon C. Strachan, an aide to Haldeman, that "the President wants this project (the bugging) to go on."

- That Hunt had demanded \$70,000 just before he was to be sentenced for his part in the Watergate break-in and that he President's personal lawyer, Herbert W. Kalmbach, had arranged for money to be paid to Hunt's attorney, William O. Bittman.

- That O'Brien was convinced that the President's former appointments secretary, Dwight L. Chapin, "will take a bath" for his part in a campaign of sabotage directed at Democratic candidates and that the sabotage had included a spurious letter accusing Senator Edmund S. Muskie (Dem-Me.) of casting a slur on French Canadians who migrated to New England.

Ehrlichman said that he had followed up the interview with O'Brien with interrogation of Dean, Kalmbach, Strachan, Colson, Mitchell, Magruder and two others, Egil Krogh Jr., a former White House official, and L. Patrick Gray III, the one-time acting director of the FBI.