

Authentic New Type of Political

By Dan Morgan

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If members of the Senate Watergate committee thought they could uncover a different sort of man this week behind the scowls and flashing, side-of-the-mouth smile of John D. Ehrlichman, they probably were disappointed.

The former presidential assistant proved to be an authentic new type of American political man, with his own philosophy, vocabulary and deep sense of righteousness. He was essentially impervious to the assaults of moral outrage and allegations of actual wrongdoing hurled at him by the committee.

Other Watergate witnesses have stammered and stuttered, and some have even repented in the full light of public scrutiny, but John Ehrlichman seemed to have come through four days of questioning with few perceptible doubts about the rightness of his own conduct.

Sen. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. (R-Conn.) tried to shake Ehrlichman's concept of what is right and wrong in politics yesterday afternoon with a long, sarcastic series of questions about the White House's use of a paid agent to ferret out dirt about the sexual and domestic habits of political opponents.

But the witness, a non-drinking, non-smoking Christian Scientist, stood his ground and came back with an indignant counterattack about the drinking problems of congressmen.

"Do you mean to tell me and this committee that you consider private investigators going into sexual habits, drinking habits, domestic problems and personal social activities as a proper subject for investigation during the course of a political campaign?" Weicker asked.

Ehrlichman responded instantly that he knew of congressmen who "totter onto the floor in a condition which, of at least partial inebriation would preclude them from making any sort of sober judgment on the issues that confront this country."

If that could only be brought out through their political opponents, then the

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opponent "has an affirmative obligation to bring that forward," he said.

Weicker said at one point in the colloquy that he and Ehrlichman apparently operated from "two different concepts of politics in this country." The witness seemed to agree.

In the end, the senator said of Ehrlichman's views, "I find that unbelievable."

Ehrlichman frequently turned the moral tables on his interrogators during the questioning.

When the senators tried to pin him down on his possible role in the cover-up, Ehrlichman countered that he was the man who had argued with the President and others for "getting the story out, getting it before the public."

It was presidential counsel John W. Dean III, and not him, who had pressed the President to allow immunity before the grand jury for members of the White House staff, the witness said.

In opposing a blanket decree of immunity, Ehrlichman said, "I just think that is wrong, number one, I do not think anybody in the White House is entitled to immunity if they have done something wrong, and they ought to take the penalty."

That remark brought a twitter from the audience, but Ehrlichman did not seem to notice.

There were other times when the witness kept a straight face while delivering statements that brought laughter from the audience.

One such moment came when Ehrlichman declared in response to questions by Weicker, "There is room for improvement in the practice of politics in this country."

That was about the closest the witness came, though, to the self-criticism that the committee seemed to want.

Earlier in the week, he never swerved from his stated conviction that the burglary of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist was justified under lofty motives of national security.

If the Watergate cover-up had put into question the entire credibility of the American government, Ehrlichman acted as if he was completely oblivious.

On Wednesday, he told the committee:

"One thing we were scrupulous about was trying never to have [White House press secretary] Ron Ziegler go out and say something to the press that was erroneous."

That also brought laughter from the spectators, but there was not a flicker of amusement on the face of Ehrlichman.

In Ehrlichman, the committee had a witness who seemed gifted at using the English language, or at least the new American military-industrial vocabulary, to soften the allegations of criminal wrongdoing.

In Ehrlichman's vocabulary, the possibility of a criminal indictment became "a problem."

Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell had an apparent "problem," but he and presidential adviser H. R. Haldeman "did not have a problem."

Mitchell, he said, "might have some exposure for perjury."

But he and Haldeman, he said, were assured that their "exposure" was different.

Their connection with Watergate defense funds was not "a problem for you in an ultimate sense," Ehrlichman said he was assured by Dean.

Regarding the possibility of criminal indictments, Ehrlichman left the impression that most of the discussions on the subject in the White House had been conducted in the vein of detached, scholarly arguments about the separation of powers and the inherent powers of the President—rather than about criminal guilt and matters of right and wrong.

For Dean, it was a "close case" whether he was indictable.

According to Ehrlichman, he avoided "evidentiary discussions" about Watergate with the President since the President was deeply preoccupied with the constitutional issue of separation of powers, an issue raised by the possibility that White House aides and papers might be sought for testimony and documentation.

The smokescreen of euphemisms thrown up by the witness plainly did little to diminish the skepticism of the committee members, however.

Sen. Edward J. Gurney (R-Fla.), who some observers have thought was the member most friendly to the

Nixon administration, seemed unconvinced by the witness' testimony about immunity.

"When somebody talks about immunity, obviously they are afraid of ending up in the pokey," he said in his soft voice.

Ehrlichman tried to fend off the soft, reasonable voice with an explanation that some people in the White House favored immunity because it was "the sort of lubricant that was needed in this thing to get people to fully tell their stories."

But the voice trailed after him, with the question, "If everybody is innocent of everything . . . why would people worry about immunity?"

In the end, it was John Ehrlichman's testimony against that of half a dozen other witnesses who have gone before him.

It was also his political morality against the political morality of the Senate Watergate Committee.

On that point, the witness was not evasive. He did not disavow a single one of the techniques employed by the White House to suppress its opponents. In that respect, he seemed untouchable by the elected men who sat as his interrogators.

Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), the committee chairman, lectured him about the Constitution, and Weicker lectured him on political morality, but the gulf between them seemed as wide as the Mississippi.

Ehrlichman was a witness whose perceptions of America political practice seemed to put him not only in another generation from Ervin, but almost in another country.

In debating with Ehrlichman, Weicker said he thought political matters were settled in America on the basis of "issues," not on the basis of "sexual habits and domestic problems. . . ."

To that Ehrlichman said that such questions of "intoxication and immorality" are important questions to ask.

"As far as I know, the selection of people in this administration has been very rigorous and the standards have been very high."

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