

An Answer for Everything in the Hall of Perjury

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

"That is my metaphor, yes," said John Ehrlichman, and in the Great Marble Hall of Perjury the mind's eye imagined rows of dangling, rotten corpses suspended by their necks from the street lamps along Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House.

Lowell Weicker, the Connecticut Republican who's been known to wear white Levis to the hearings, had just asked the deposed Gauleiter if he had not said that the White House Horribles should let Pat Gray, "hang there, let him twist slowly, slowly in the wind."

It was not only that Ehrlichman had picked that question of all questions to answer truthfully, it was the vividness of this metaphor used in a telephone call to John Dean during the period that Gray was being exposed and rejected at his Senate FBI confirmation hearing. No regret for the disaster overtaking this man whom they'd used and who'd served them probably past the bounds of the law. The sociopathic personality of the witness showed no consciousness of the consternation he evoked.

Some of the consternation derived from the simple, but somewhat ignoble, desire to see this proud pup squirm in humble public contrition. The most popular witnesses have been those who acknowledged guilt and asked for forgiveness. Attendance at the hearings gives you an insight into why the Russians should have held their infamous public trials at which the defendants were forced to grovel and confess. It has always been said they were conducted for propaganda reasons, but, judging from emotions here, such displays also satisfy our need for revenge and to make our faith in our political institutions whole again by having the malefactors recant. There is a little bit of Ehrlichman in all of us, and it only takes an Ehrlichman to bring it out.

All of this was lost on the Sociopath who may be the most truthful witness thus far. Nobody could tell such stories without believing they're true.

His words spring from a moral pathology which differs from arrogance, although heaven knows he is blessed with a bountiful supply of that, too. John Mitchell was arrogant—arrogant and disdainfully surly in the manner of one who has been found out. If much of what he said was preposterously unbelievable on its face, his was a case of "why should I bother to explain myself to you, toads?"

Not so with Ehrlichman. Mitchell limited his answers to the least he could get away with—"We weren't volunteering anything," he said more than once. The So-

ciopath, however, was elaborate in misbegotten detail, all of which is susceptible to easy verification and refutation. Who would spin the yarn about Ellsberg's father-in-law and J. Edgar Hoover without bothering to pick up the phone to check the facts?

"What a liar?" Inouye was heard to exclaim over an inadvertently live microphone, and everybody took his meaning to be what a big liar, but he might have meant what a lousy one. With the previous witnesses, close students of Watergate rifled through the ever-growing files and records to find the contradictions, and bring them to light. With Ehrlichman they were so blatant, people had debates over whether he lies when he cocks that right eyebrow into an arch or when he flattens it level. It was not his testimony, but Ehrlichman himself that was shocking.

The Sociopath has an answer for everything and a sometimes puzzled, sometimes blank look for the outraged moral sensitivities around him. In this most middle-class of all societies in which to own, to possess in fee simple a mortgage-free house, to be a property owner is the ambition, he can't understand why everyone around him is appalled at the burglary. Personally, he says, to extend his paraphrase slightly, I'd have preferred taking the doctor's nurse out and getting her drunk in a motel so we could come upon the files that way, but what difference does it make?

"Do you remember when we were in law school?" Herman Talmadge of Georgia asks him, "we studied . . . that no matter how humble a man's cottage is that even the King of England cannot enter without his consent?" To which the Sociopath responds in the blandest tones of *fait accompli*, "I am afraid that that has been considerably eroded over the years."

Pre-Ehrlichman the question propounded about each witness was, is he an idiot or a liar. Ehrlichman suggests a third choice, the devil's own psychiatric. He send his agents out to procure Ellsberg's psychiatric profile, and now we look for his. He knows it. Sociopaths are rational, which is why in his opening statement he is compelled to refute the suspicion that, "We were all suffering from some advanced forms of neurosis—some strange White House madness."

Maybe there was none and they bugged themselves for historical not hysterical purposes. Then what are we left with? The scary resemblance of his speech to Nixon's, the oft-made observation that this Gauleiter was the most pleasant, most likeable of all the high ranking White House Horribles, and that damnable metaphor—hanging there, twisting, slowly, slowly in the wind.