

Robert C. Maynard

Mr. Ehrlichman Grants an Interview

Sen. Montoya: Now, on July 21, you were quoted in an article in The New York Times as being in favor of releasing the tapes which are in controversy. Did you make that kind of statement?

Mr. Ehrlichman: Well, I have had a lot of trouble with quotations in The New York Times, Senator, and that is one of them. (NYT 23 Jul, p. 11)

As Watergate stories go, it was hardly earth-shaking. Simply put, John Ehrlichman, whose defense posture and strategy are intimately linked to President Nixon's, told a reporter something that journalists on two continents took to mean that he favored the release of the White House secret tape recordings. And he was quoted as saying it only a day before the Nixon administration made it clear that the tapes would not be released.

Precisely what Ehrlichman said, and the circumstances under which he spoke, have become a matter of dispute. As with much else that has passed between the Nixon administration and the press, especially regarding Watergate, the media consumer must decide in each dispute in whom to have faith.

Sometimes, because of the clouded character of the material, the choice is difficult. Deciding whether Colson-told-Dean-what-Ehrlichman-says-Haldeman-told-Clawson-Dean-told-him-about-what-Colson-said leaves many a citizen limp with confusion.

For that reason, the exchange outside his house in Virginia between Ehrlichman and Gerald Seymour of Independent Television News of London about the presidential tapes is significant and interesting. What they said to each other about the tapes is on film. Moreover, the circumstances under which they said it can be corroborated to some extent by disinterested bystanders.

It would have been easy for readers of The Washington Post and The New York Times to have missed the story altogether. It appeared in the 13th paragraph of the lead story of The Washington Post on July 21, a Saturday. The three-paragraph insert said:

"One major figure in the Watergate case, former Nixon aide John D. Ehrlichman, said yesterday he was 'delighted' to know the tapes had been made and he expected 'they will be sort of the ultimate evidence in this thing.'

"Ehrlichman, interviewed by the British Independent Television News, said the tapes 'certainly' should be produced for the committee.

"I may have said some things about some people to the President that were very frank and candid and unvarnished," he said, "but as far as events or circumstances or my position in this whole controversy, I don't have a thing to worry about as far as those tapes are concerned."

After the 18th paragraph of its main Watergate story, The Times added a "shirttail" story from London saying essentially what The Post's story said.

The Times story, four paragraphs from the Associated Press, ended with this sentence:



By Ed Strecky

John D. Ehrlichman at his home on the morning of July 19.

"Asked if he thought the tapes should be released by the President, Mr. Ehrlichman said: 'Certainly.'"

It is to the use of that quoted word, "Certainly," that Ehrlichman took exception. When it appeared on the AP wire from London, a reporter in Washington undertook to confirm the story with Ehrlichman.

The reporter, Barry Kalb of the Washington Star-News, reached Ehrlichman at home that Friday morning, July 20, and told him what the AP was moving on its wires from London.

Ehrlichman told Kalb his actual views had been misrepresented in the AP dispatch. "They were asking me if the tapes would clear up any question," Kalb recalls Ehrlichman telling him, "and I said 'certainly.'"

Kalb said he then phoned the local office of the AP and told a newsman he knows there that Ehrlichman denied the substance of the agency's report. On that basis, the AP man said, he called New York, told the agency headquarters that AP's story had been challenged by the source and suggested it be checked further.

For a little more than an hour, the AP withheld the story. New York notified London AP that the story was being challenged. London obtained a transcript of the interview, as aired on Independent Television—the private competitor of the government-owned BBC—and sent it to New York.

When New York AP received the transcript from London, the story was released, this time with some more from the interview quoted in an additional paragraph.

Seymour and officials of ITN insist that "not a scissors went in" to the portion of the interview ITN broadcast on the tapes controversy. The tape discussion was aired intact. Here is that portion of the interview, as it was broadcast and as it appears in the ITN transcript:

Seymour: The matter of the secret tapes in the Oval Office, did you know about those, Mr. Ehrlichman?

Ehrlichman: No, I didn't.

Seymour: They could perhaps vindicate you, couldn't they?

Ehrlichman: I would think they will be sort of the ultimate er, the ultimate evidence in this thing.

Seymour: You'd want those produced, would you?

Ehrlichman: Oh, certainly, certainly. I don't have, er, thinking back I may have said some things about some people to the President that were very frank and candid, and unvarnished, but as far as events or circumstances or my position in this whole controversy, I don't have a thing to worry about as far as those tapes are concerned. I'm delighted they're there.

We will return to the question of how Seymour obtained this remarkable interview with Ehrlichman, what Ehrlichman said of those circumstances and what a witness says. First, Ehrlichman's answer to Sen. Montoya as to what he told the reporter, as it appears in the official transcript of the proceedings of the Ervin committee:

The News Business

Ehrlichman: . . . this fellow said something to the effect, "Do you have anything to worry about if these tapes get out?"

And I said, "No, I don't think I have anything to worry about. I didn't know I was being taped, but I don't think I said anything there that would, that I would be ashamed of."

And he said, "Well, then you think the President ought to release these?"

And I said, "Well, you know you have got to look at this from two standpoints. Certainly from my standpoint I have no problem, but he has a much larger picture to look at."

Well, the word "certainly" is what carried on the wire, and the rest of the sentence didn't get carried, and so I saw the wire story and it said, "Ehrlichman today in response to a question, 'Should the President release these tapes?' said, 'certainly.'"

Well what I said was in effect, "Certainly I don't have anything to worry about but the President has got a lot more worries than I have about the country and the separation of powers and his relationship with the Congress and so on."

Now, having just said that sentence, I will bet you The New York Times tomorrow says, "Ehrlichman says the President has a lot more to worry about than he does."

A journalist in his 30s, Seymour does general assignment reporting for ITN. The week before he came to Washington, he'd been in the Bahamas for the independence story.

Stopping in Washington, he suggested to his colleague and friend Mike Brunson, the ITN correspondent here, that he might take a run at an interview with Ehrlichman.

As he recalled it in a telephone conversation from London a few days ago, Seymour set out from Washington in a taxicab for Great Falls, Va., late Wednesday afternoon, July 18, to find Ehrlichman's house.

Seymour had no intention of trying for a filmed interview that evening, he said, and so did not bring along a film crew.

"It was my idea that Ehrlichman might be willing to talk about life in his household since the whole disgrace of Watergate and the loss of power and so forth," Seymour said. "I arrived at the house at about 6 that evening and found a Newsweek photographer there."

Ed Streeky, a Washington free-lance photographer on assignment for Newsweek, remembers Wednesday the 18th vividly. "When I got out there, hoping to get some shots of Ehrlichman, there were some kids riding by his house on horseback," Streeky recalled the other day. "They shouted at me, called me a snoop and threw eggs at me. They told me I had no right to be there, that it was a private road."

Seymour and Streeky, strangers until then, waited together for Ehrlichman's arrival, after Seymour rang the doorbell and was told by Mrs. Ehrlichman that her husband would be home around 7.

When Ehrlichman arrived, Seymour spoke with him and told him of his desire for a "soft" interview, one that would explore family life and circumstances, not the hard details of Watergate. Ehrlichman, to Seymour's delight and surprise, was readily agreeable. They made an appointment for 9 the following morning.

Streeky fired off a few frames as Seymour and Ehrlichman chatted that evening, but the light was fading. Since he knew he would be able to obtain better shots in the morning, he decided to wait.

At 8:30 the following morning, Seymour and a film crew set up a camera on a tripod outside the Ehrlichman home. At 10 minutes before 9, Seymour, anxious to get under way, rang the doorbell, only to be told by Mrs. Ehrlichman that her husband was still eating breakfast and would be out at 9.

"Right on the dot of 9," Seymour reported later, Ehrlichman emerged from his home. "He was in a most affa-

ble and friendly mood," Seymour recalled.

The microphone Seymour chose to use would later prove to be significant. Ehrlichman was wearing a bow tie that morning and Seymour clipped a small microphone on the front of his shirt. It is plainly visible in the film and in the photographs Streeky took as the interview proceeded.

They talked for 15 minutes, consuming more than 400 feet of color film, stopping once to change the film magazine, and then continuing on for a few more minutes. Ehrlichman talked about the effect of Watergate on his life, of having more time with his family, of their plans to leave Washington: "It's the most expensive city in the country, I guess."

The neighbors have been "just terrific" in their support and he said he thinks they believe his version of the Watergate story.

He doesn't think any member of Congress is "gunning" for him, Ehrlichman said, but he conceded that "I've broken a few hearts in Congress by saying that we can't build that dam, or he can't have that appointment. . ."

One week after that interview, on Thursday, July 26, in the morning session of the Watergate hearings, Sen. Montoya asked about the quotation in The New York Times and received Ehrlichman's response that "I have had a lot of trouble with quotations in The New York Times . . . and that is one of them."

Ehrlichman then went on to testify to Sen. Montoya and the rest of the Ervin committee as to the circumstances under which he gave the interview, before contradicting its substance as to the tapes.

"What happened," Ehrlichman said of the interview with Seymour, "was that I gave a television interview to a fellow; you know they come out and sit on my lawn and as I come out in the morning, it's pretty well unavoidable. . ."

He then went on to his version of the conversation, placing "certainly" in a context the film does not support. Nor does the film support the contention that Ehrlichman was taken by surprise and said just a few words on the run, words which were later misinterpreted by the press.

People stumbling over reporters on their front lawn in the morning don't stop and allow the pesty reporter to clip his own microphone onto their shirts.

More than that, when it was all over, Seymour asked Ehrlichman if he would get in his car and drive it slowly out of the driveway so that British viewers could see a major Watergate figure driving off to work.

Ehrlichman did indeed drive off somewhere, leaving Seymour behind to pack his gear and head home to London with something of a prize for his television station. It would be 24 hours before it went on the air, and at that, the ITN only used about one minute and seven seconds of the 15 minutes of film.

When it finally was broadcast, the story was playing beside such other developments as the hoaxing of Sen. Ervin by a caller making believe he was Secretary of the Treasury Shultz, the departure of Mr. Nixon from the hospital, and the first firm indications that the President would withhold the tapes Ehrlichman seemed to think on Thursday it would be all right to release.

Seymour talked about his experience with Watergate America after having returned to London from yet another assignment, this one in the Mideast.

After all that running around, Seymour said, he felt "a bit knackered," a British expression that means very weary, precisely the way many Americans have come to feel about the contradictions of Watergate.