

Questions the Ervin Committee Should Ask

LOOSE ENDS

By Walter Pincus

(excerpt at end)

What was discussed about Watergate on June 17, 1972 in the 2-hour and 15-minute morning meeting President Nixon had with his two chief aides, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, just three days after the arrests at the Democratic national headquarters? Ehrlichman and Haldeman had just come from a 90-minute meeting with campaign manager Mitchell, then Attorney General Kleindienst and White House Counsel John Wesley Dean III. The topic at that meeting had been Watergate. In fact it was the first face-to-face discussion these major figures in the affair had after the arrests. Mitchell already knew of the participation of two former White House aides, Liddy and Howard Hunt, as well as his own campaign deputy, Jeb Magruder. By then he also had been told that there had been a prior break-in and that a burglary team in operation on at least one telephone. Dean, who had questioned both Liddy and Magruder by this time, had supposedly briefed Ehrlichman. Ehrlichman had talked to his political aide, Gordon Strachan, and according to the latter had asked that Strachan's files be cleaned. Kleindienst had been approached on June 17 by Liddy, who allegedly said Mitchell had said to get McCord out of jail.

Thus the participants in the early morning June 20 meeting knew quite a bit more than the President has ever acknowledged knowing prior to April 17, 1973. How much did Haldeman and Ehrlichman tell

the President that day? Special prosecutor Archibald Cox is seeking the tape of that Oval Office meeting on June 20 saying, "it should show the extent of the knowledge of any illegal activity by the participants [in the meetings] or any effort to conceal the truth from the [President]."

Later on June 20th, according to LaRue, he and Mardian briefed Mitchell about a long interview they had had that afternoon with Liddy. During that session Liddy told them of some activities of the White House plumbers, including the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. At 6:08 pm that evening Mitchell talked to the President for four minutes. Cox is also seeking this taped conversation. The special prosecutor says "this apparently was the first direct

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contact after the break-in between [the President] and Mitchell, so what Mitchell reported may be highly material." Mitchell testified that during this conversation he apologized to the President for what had happened, but knew nothing more than that five men had been arrested. That was not true as to his own knowledge. As subsequent testimony proved, he knew much more. Why did he mislead the committee? And *did* he mislead the President?

Disclosure of the substance of those two June events, the presidential morning meeting and the late afternoon phone call, could go a long way toward establishing what the President knew and what he wanted to know. For by the next day, June 21, plans for the cover-up began to be put together.