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Martha Mitchell: Two Long Years After Watergate

By Donnie Radcliffe

NEW YORK—Sometimes she sat guru fashion, her sandaled feet tucked beneath her on a down-filled French bergere. At other times she roamed the 14-room Fifth Avenue apartment overlooking Central Park where she lives alone.

Life-size portraits of her, John Mitchell and their 12-year-old daughter, Marty, gazed from the walls. This day she bore little resemblance to her own portrait. It is an artist's somewhat fanciful interpretation of a sedately elegant Martha Mitchell who, even in her Washington heyday, never quite existed.

Two years after Watergate, Martha Mitchell, 55, is still confused about the way her private life was caught up in a national crisis. In anguished reappraisals of herself and those with whom she once associated, she forages for the answers.

Thinner now than one remembered (a size 10, she said, instead of a "large 12 or even 14"), the flashy, wide-mouthed smile that once drew instant recognition from the masses came sparingly.

She constantly sipped something, if not a soft drink, a highball. Half-smoked cigarettes were in ashtrays throughout the apartment; to the consternation of her maid, who cannot sleep at night until satisfied that the final one at bedside is ground out to charred remains.

In private, this Martha Mitchell is remorseful and self-reproaching. In conversation she dwells now on the story of how Watergate, for her, began and ended; as if the telling and retelling of what happened to her, and what she saw, heard and did, will provide new insight into what went wrong with her life.

Emotional and agitated at times, she talked during an interview she initiated, which began on May 31 and continued at intervals during the next two days. Altogether, her narrative totaled nearly 14 hours. In it, she said that:

- While serving as President Nixon's foreign affairs adviser and as head of the National Security Council, Henry Kissinger telephoned her husband, then Attorney General, "nightly" at the Mitchells' Watergate apartment;
- President Nixon and Mitchell had been grooming L. Patrick Gray since 1968 to replace FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, whom they unsuccessfully pressured to resign in 1971;
- Mitchell once started to tell her of an "airtight" campaign espionage plan but she told him she did not want to hear about it;
- She was admitted under an alias to a California hospital emergency room a few days after Watergate in what she now believes was part of a plan to commit her to a mental institution;
- Mitchell told her on June 18, 1972, that he would not resign as head of CRP although a few days later in Washington he did so, citing her health as the reason.

Estranged from Mitchell since last fall when "he walked out and left me with $945," she is seeking separate maintenance and custody of Marty, a student at a Connecticut girls' boarding school.

See MITCHELL, K8, Col. 1

Martha Mitchell in her Fifth Avenue apartment: "She believes the Nixon administration and her husband's colleagues are 'scared to death of me.' In the next breath, she confesses, 'I'm scared to death of them.'"

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Photos by Harry Naltchayan—The Wahington Post

MITCHELL, From K1

She can write checks on an account to which Mitchell makes deposits, but said she never sees the statements and never knows her bank balance. She is writing a book but as yet there is no publication date. She is trying her hand at television and this week will be guest hostess on a New York morning talk show.

Mitchell, she said, now lives under an assumed name in a Manhattan hotel where he changes rooms every two weeks. He has rebuffed her efforts to share their daughter's weekend visits to New York, she said, and she charged that he has tried to "blackmail" her with promises of "generous" financial provisions in exchange for custody of the child.

There are telephones throughout the apartment, still as essential to her life as they were in Washington, where her outrageous midnight phone calls won her the nicknames "the warbler of Watergate" or "Martha the mouth."

Her other trademarks: the stiletto heels and the extravagantly coiffed blond hair, were not visible. Instead, she was casually immaculate in silk pants and contrasting shirts, her hair pulled back by ribbons which she restlessly tied and united.

She does not sleep well, some days drinks milk by the quart, suspects doormen of spying on her visitors, suspects her enemies of buying off her friends and even suspects herself of playing into "their" hands.

"I'm stupid, I'm stupid because I let the American public down," she castigated herself at one point.

"I say to myself, 'How can you be such a goddamn fool? . . . I place myself in the position of Patty Hearst many times because I was brainwashed."

She believes that the Nixon administration and her husband's former colleagues are "scared to death of me" because she knows "plenty." In the next instant, she confesses, "I'm scared to death of them."

Seared in her memory are her days of glory as the administration's "secret weapon," when President Nixon once told her, "Give 'em hell, Martha." She says that "never has there been in the whole history of American politics a wife in the position I was, where I had the whole country for me."

She continues to look for signs of that popularity and repeats what she says Gov. George Wallace told her on a visit to see him in Montgomery, Ala., last month: "If anything happens to you, this country will be up in arms."

She said she knows that there were some in Washington who did not welcome her presence or the work she tried to do. And she draws a picture of their resistance in a story about how she once decided that Nixon administration Cabinet wives should

By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

Mrs. Mitchell at the organ in her Fifth Avenue apartment.

leave some permanent memento to Blair House as their predecessors had.

She ordered needlepoint designs made of the presidential, vice presidential and departmental seals, she said. The cost came to about $70 apiece and when the bills went out, she said that First Lady Pat Nixon balked the most.

Mrs. Nixon was "horribly afraid of her status" being threatened, according to Mrs. Mitchell. "She resented the hell out of me. That's the reason I wanted to get out of Washington. I didn't want to compete with anybody."

The way Martha Mitchell remembers the chronology of June 17, 1972—the day of the Watergate break-in—is not the way her husband or presidential assistant H. R. (Bob) Haldeman told the Senate Select Watergate Committee that they remembered it.

On July 10, 1973, Mitchell told the committee that he was "advised" of the break-in on June 17 while accompying California Gov. Ronald Reagan to "a series of political meetings" in Los Angeles.

Haldeman, on July 31, 1973, told the committee that he was with the presidential party in Key Biscayne when "I am sure that some time during that weekend, somebody" told him about the burglary. When he found out, he testified, he did "nothing."

According to Mrs. Mitchell, her husband was asleep on the 17th in the Beverly Hills Hotel, sharing a kingsize bed with her. At 7 a.m., (10 a.m. Washington time) the phone rang. She said she thought, "Who in the 'h' is calling us at 7 o'clock?" when she picked up the receiver. She heard the operator say, "The White House is calling. We have Mr. Haldeman for Mr. Mitchell."

Though Mitchell took the call in the adjoining living room at her request, Mrs. Mitchell swears "to God to you" that neither her husband nor any of those other "characters" from the Committee for the Re-election of the President who were with them in California that weekend, knew about the Watergate arrests until Haldeman first "broke the word." And according to Mrs. Mitchell, who remembers glancing at the bedside clock, that "word" came less than 7½ hours after the five Watergate burglars were arrested.

Asserting that the Haldeman call to Mitchell has never been made public before, Mrs. Mitchell regards it as an important discrepancy between what she believes really happened and what the people have testified happened. She says it is one of many things she knows and why John Mitchell and his former associates are "scared to death" of her.

She did not want to go to California that weekend, she says, because "they had been working me to death" that spring and she was tired. CRP had Vice President Agnew out for "a few speeches, and Bob Dole and Martha Mitchell, while the rest of them were home doing dirty tricks."

She says that Pat Nixon was not pulling her load or "following what she was supposed to do . . . she never did anything she was supposed to other than greet people in the White House." But she knew that Mrs. Nixon was going to be the principal lure at a major Hollywood celebrity party on the coast and she told CRP officials, "you don't need me."

She had been fuming all spring over the way CRP scheduling aide Herbert L. Porter handled her campaign itinerary. She often arrived at events ill-prepared and poorly briefed, due to poor advance planning, she says. Once when she turned up unexpectedly in Porter's CRP office, she found him poring over a schedule of Maine Democrat Sen. Edmund S. Muskie ("almost including

when Muskie went to the bathroom").

And despite President Nixon's praise of Porter to her at dinner one night at Camp David, she later asked Jeb Stuart Magruder, deputy campaign director, to replace Porter with someone she could depend on.

(Mr. Nixon's praise of Porter is one reason why she doubts whether the White House tapes are "legit". In the transcript of March 21, 1973, Mr. Nixon is quoted as asking who Porter is. "He knew who Porter was," Mrs. Mitchell says. "All he talked about that night was Porter.")

She gave in on the Califoria trip when Fred LaRue, a Mitchell deputy at CRP, told her his wife would not go unless she did. "I felt sorry for her. He lived in Washington at the Watergate and she lived with the kids in Mississippi. She never got to go anyplace."

In Los Angeles, everybody stayed at the Beverly Hills Hotel, across or down the hall from each other.

On Saturday morning, June 17, she said, the call from Haldeman to Mitchell came through. Mitchell dressed and disappeared and though she knows that Magruder later told the Senate Watergate Committee he got news of the break-in downstairs at breakfast, she doubts anybody in the party was eating as early as 7 a.m.

"They kept me on the run" that day, she says, and she neither saw television, heard the radio nor read any newspapers, so she knew nothing of the burglary back in Washington.

She remembers walking into a room later in the day and seeing "all of them with their heads down. I said 'For God's sake, what's the matter with all of you? I came out here to have a good time.' And they all dispersed."

Another time she saw La Rue and Robert Mardian, CRP's political coordinator, "with their heads together. At one point they went into the kitchen — we had a full kitchen in the hotel suite—and talked. I thought, 'Isn't this stupid?' "

Still another time at the hotel, she said she overheard LaRue making arrangements by telephone for a special plane to take Magruder back to Washington.

"I said, 'What in the world is going on? What do you mean you have an emergency to get Magruder back to Washington?' "

On Sunday, the 18th, everybody went on to Newport Beach, the coastal resort south of Los Angeles. Alone with Mitchell in their villa, she asked him to quit as head of CRP.

'I said, "Honey, I am tired. Nixon is going to win, he has no opposition. Let's get out of this now and go back to New York.' "

She had "worked behind the scenes" trying to prevent Mitchell from leaving his Cabinet post. Once she talked to then-Deputy Attorney General Kleindienst who, she says, agreed to go to CRP but Mr. Nixon wanted Mitchell instead.

Mitchell was going to be nothing more than "a figurehead," she says, with the real campaign reins being jerked by Haldeman and President Nixon's domestic counselor, John Ehrlichman, from the White House.

"Everybody said, 'Don't worry, Martha, it's all in a book. Mitchell won't have to do anything.' "

The "book," she claims, was "Gemstone," that mysterious missal of campaign espionage which Magruder has testified he burned in his fireplace but which Mrs. Mitchell "was under the impression there was more than one copy" of.

"When Mitchell first presented it to me in the apartment — and Mitchell's words were that they had the 'most airtight espionage system' working that had been worked out by the White House — I raised my right hand . . . and said I don't want to know," she says.

She finally gave in when "the last person I consulted," Charles G. "Bebe" Rebozo, longtime friend of President Nixon whom she says "never did anything political without consulting Rebozo," talked her into letting Mitchell go to CRP.

So that Sunday in Newport Beach, Mitchell listened to her plea that he quit, she says, but turned her down. "And his verbatim words to me were 'Honey, hang on for 2½ more months and I will take you back to New York.' Then he said—and this fits into the pattern, you see, that I'd fallen into—'Since you're so tired, why don't you stay out here for a few days, get some sun and swim?' "

The next morning, June 19, she still had not heard about Watergate and after Mitchell, Porter, LaRue and Mardian left for Washington, she went looking for the newspapers they had been reading by the pool. "Mardian had come in looking like a newspaper boy, with papers under his arm" but she discovered that none had been left behind.

She sent Steve King, a bodyguard, out to get her one, took it upstairs to her bedroom, settled down and started to read. "Jesus Christ! I jumped out of bed like a sheet of lightning," she says when she read a headline about Watergate.

She tried to call Mitchell but he was still in the air, flying to Washington. Next she tried Magruder and Robert Odle, CRP's director of administration and personnel, who told her, she says, "They would do the best they could for Mr. President and John Mitchell." When she finally reached Mitchell, he and "the others we've all read about" were at the Mitchells' Watergate apartment.

See MITCHELL, K9, Col. 1

MITCHELL, From K8

"Mitchell told me a lot of bull—that somebody tried to create this problem for us, that there's nothing to it and not to worry about it. I am completely confused. Here is a break-in of the Democratic National Headquarters and they have not allowed me to watch television or see the news."

Now convinced that "the reason they didn't want me back in Washington was so they could hold these conferences at the apartment rather than at CREEP (sic)," she says Mitchell often conducted business at home.

Henry Kissinger, when he was Mr. Nixon's foreign affairs adviser and head of the National Security Council, telephoned Mitchell nightly, she says.

"I swear to God to you that there was never a night that passed that Mitchell didn't talk to Kissinger . . . Kissinger was forever and eternally on the phone with Mitchell.

The two men "were very close," she says.

By Tuesday, June 20, she had decided that "I had asked Mitchell on Sunday to resign (from CRP) and I wasn't staying in this mess. I had seen what had gone on previously to some extent, had not agreed with them, had found fault with what they were doing and had become very suspicious since '68."

In what she now calls "a dress rehearsal" for the 1972 campaign, she says Nixon campaign strategists had "practiced the same tactics in a minor way on everybody and everything" in the 1968 campaign.

So she called UPI reporter Helen Thomas to tell her that if Mitchell didn't leave the committee, he would be losing his wife.

What followed was the bizarre story of Martha Mitchell held captive as a "political prisoner," when she was forcibly sedated and injured in a struggle with King when she smashed her left hand through a plate glass patio door.

Calls for help proved futile, she says, although surrounding her villa were FBI agents she claims she recognized. Staying at the hotel, she says she has since learned, was then-acting FBI Director Gray "but nobody has brought that out."

Gray, according to Mrs. Mitchell, had been heir apparent since 1968 to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover whom Mr. Nixon and John Mitchell were trying to pressure out of office.

"Mr. Hoover was trying to lay the line down where he didn't want to tap these phones, and he was persona non grata," she says. Gray, on the other hand, was regarded as "a yes man."

The President and Mitchell once had dinner with Hoover in his Northwest home for the express purpose of persuading Hoover to resign, she says.

She and Hoover had known each other for 20 years, she says. Once he told her he did not know how he was going to cope with her husband and asked what she thought he should do.

Photos by Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

"Seared in her memory are her days of glory as the administration's 'secret weapon,' when President Nixon would tell her 'Give 'em hell, Martha.' She says that 'never has there been in the whole history of American politics a wife in the position I was, where I had the whole country for me.'"

"I said, 'Mr. Hoover, I don't know, I can't tell you. It's unbelieveable to me because I don't now what the circumstances are.'"

In May, 1971, the American Newspaper Women's Club honored her at a dinner in Washington and she says she asked to share the spotlight with Hoover. It was a rare public appearance for him and he made such a "fantastic showing," she believes, that it thwarted efforts by the administration to retire him on the pretext of age.

Martha Mitchell's troubles with her daughter began in Newport Beach, she says, when the child was allowed to see "the condition I was in, without food, plying me with liquor. They were brainwashing Marty, allowing her to come in and see while they threw me down on a bed and they displaced my pants" to administer what she insists was "an eight-hour shot" (sedative).

Mrs. Mitchell did not summon Herbert Kalmbach, President Nixon's personal attorney, but someone did, and though she had only met him briefly on previous occasions, "God, I'd have been glad to see the devil himself." Kalmbach summoned his personal physician to suture the cuts on her hand. The physician balked, saying she needed to go to a hospital.

Alluding to her fears of what might be done to her, she believes that she was "saved" from a mental institution by sheer coincidence. "Who was there in the emergency room but the doctor who treated the burn on my other hand (when a matchbook exploded a few days earlier)," she says.

Though Kalmbach had ordered that she be admitted under the name of Dorothy Kalmbach, Mrs. Mitchell says, the doctor recognized her and said, "For God sake, Martha, what are you

doing here?"

Kalmbach, as she remembered it, was "beside himself, pacing the floor." Before driving her back to her villa, he stopped at his office, leaving her in the car to wait.

"Half drunk from this shot, not physically together, covered with blood," she said she did not dare leave the car because "they would really pick me up."

Friends accompanied her to New York State where, she says, "the White House was putting out stories I was crazy . . . Mitchell even went out and said I'm in Silver Hill," a private psychiatric hospital in Connecticut specializing in treatment for alcoholics.

Mrs. Mitchell's late night telephone calls long before Watergate led to speculation in the press that she had a problem with alcohol. During the interviews two weeks ago, she had two next day and a soft drink the following day.

She says she has never seen Silver Hill, does not know what it looks like, "but that's where they (said) they had me. My God, my friends!"

The day after she returned to Washington, President Nixon telephoned her. She says she was not anxious to talk to him — "I didn't know at that point who I was mad at" — and she was relieved when her dog started barking and she could cut the conversation short.

"Nixon was telling me stories had broken all around the country that Mitchell was no longer there (CRP) and he didn't know what he was going to do without Mitchell.

"I said — and here is Martha, the loving wife who gives everything — I said 'Mr. President, I will allow John to take an advisory job, or capacity, with the committee.'"

Of Mitchell's resignation, she says now that she had "two stories" for reporters: "The one that Mitchell was going to resign anyway and (the second one) that Mitchell was resigning because of me. Now whether I fell into a pattern, as I did all along, I don't know. But as I look at things now, I was just playing into their hands."

A photograph of John Mitchell lay on a bed in the now-unused bedroom of Martha and John Mitchell's daughter. How it got there, Mrs. Mitchell did not recall, but she looked at it as if for the first time.

"He's a mean looking S.O.B., isn't he?" she said. "Why didn't anyone tell me that?"

The photograph is not the only memento of Mitchell left behind in the apartment when he departed last fall. In the study is his leather Cabinet chair which left his Justice Department office when he did.

Mrs. Mitchell never wanted him to leave Justice, but then there were other actions of which she also disapproved.

She never, for instance, quite got over John Mitchell's transformation from "a very liberal Democrat" to a Richard Nixon disciple. She remembers some Republican friends leaving the Mitchells' home in Rye, N.Y., one night in the 1960s, deeply offended when Mitchell delivered a tirade against Mr. Nixon, whom he did not then know, and his campaign tactics.

It wasn't six weeks after Mitchell's New York law firm consolidated with Mr. Nixon's, she says, that Mr. Nixon got Mitchell into politics. "I was embarrassed for Mitchell, seeing him on bended knees praising Nixon to me."

She says she would have no monetary problems today if the two law firms had not consolidated. Richard Nixon "took Mitchell's law firm and then he takes over Mitchell."

"Mitchell used to come home and say, 'Why the hell do I have to fire them?' " Mrs. Mitchell says, referring to unpleasant assignments given to him by the President. She says that "when he (Mr. Nixon) wanted to fire somebody, he got John Mitchell to fire him."

Even after the Mitchells had left Washington, even after they had moved into their Fifth Avenue apartment where they were together until fall of 1973, Richard Nixon was the central figure in their lives.

She says Mr. Nixon called her husband often, "probably to console him and keep him in the fold. One time Mitchell came back from the phone and said, 'This is the first time I've ever cussed out a President in my life.' "

For a long time, she says, "I didn't want to believe what John Mitchell did to me" but now she is convinced that the Mitchell she knew "is dead . . . I can't put this character together."