

The President's Men

On Jan. 5, 1973, when the third-rate burglary of Watergate seemed destined for nothing more than a modest footnote in the political annals of the Republic, President Nixon unveiled his program to "revitalize and streamline the Federal Government in preparation for America's third century." That ill-fated program, the visions of leadership, the aspirations of a President elected by the most sweeping landslide in the nation's history—all this now lies in ruins.

Before rapidly moving events, confessions of deception and disappearing loyalties take a toll that may be final, it is worth remembering exactly what the design of the second Nixon Administration was supposed to be.

Mr. Nixon's idea, it now appears, was to convert the White House structure for assistance to the President into an instrument of direct government control in its own right; operating and policy-making authority was delegated to surrogates who made key decisions shielded from public view and public access.

Thanks to Watergate, the President's men did not long remain in control, shielded from public view. By last week, three of those once closest to the Oval Office had been sentenced to jail.

John W. Dean 3d, former Counsel to the President, was sentenced to at least one year in prison after pleading guilty to conspiring to obstruct justice. John D. Ehrlichman, former Presidential Advisor on Domestic Affairs, convicted of false testimony and conspiring to violate the Bill of Rights, has received a sentence of at least twenty months. Charles W. Colson, former Special Counsel to the President, pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice and began a one-to-three-year prison term on July 8. Mr. Ehrlichman and the former White House Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, among others, will stand trial next month for alleged conspiracy, perjury and obstruction of justice.

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The crimes of President Nixon's men were offenses against the whole society, against the political system of the nation.

John Dean was the man who elevated the idea of retaliation against political "enemies" into a matter of high government policy. He then managed the policy of "containing" the political damage from the Watergate break-in. His one-to-four-year prison sentence is no accurate measure of the violation he committed against the American system, which he atoned for in part by his daring to come forward to expose the conspiracy. Mr. Dean has weathered all attempts to discredit the testimony which he gave the nation last summer; but as he told the court of Judge Sirica, "I was involved in corruption of government and abuse of high office; to say I'm sorry is not enough."

It was Mr. Ehrlichman who pungently described the style of executive rule that reached its culmination in the Nixon Administration. Back in 1972 he told an interviewer what the President expected from his appointees: "When he says 'Jump,'" Mr. Ehrlichman said, "they only ask 'How high?'"

A panel of the National Academy of Public Administration concluded last March that this system, "if fully achieved, would have substituted a governmental philosophy foreign to the concepts of the framers of the Constitution and the concepts of most Americans ever since then. . . . No one can guess how close the American government would be to this hierarchical model had not the Watergate exposures halted the advance toward it—at least temporarily."