

Mary McGrory

## The Case of the Missing Cover-up

Washington

**R**ICHARD M. NIXON told the nation about a year ago that he was not a crook. He never said he was not a liar, and considering the tapes that are being played in Judge John J. Sirica's courtroom this week, it is as well.

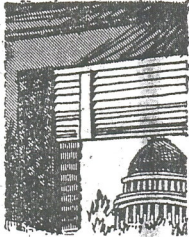
What the tapes do to the pardoned unindicted co-conspirator in San Clemente is to prove that amid the cover-up, he was conducting a separate cover-up of his own. He lied to his confederates about his proffer of a pardon to Howard Hunt, conveyed through Charles W. Colson, his own special, private monster, in a White House meeting on January 8, 1973.

Pardon, or executive clemency, as it was called at the time, was, you remember, an unmentionable subject. Haldeman and Ehrlichman swore to that before the Ervin committee.

★ ★ ★

**O**N APRIL 14, 1973, according to the White House transcripts, Ehrlichman is reporting to an anxious President about a conversation he has just had with Colson.

Colson, he says, has asked him what he can tell Hunt about clemency or pardon. Ehrlichman in-



forms Nixon that he has told Colson: "You can't tell him anything about clemency or pardon. Under no circumstances should this ever be raised with the President."

But Ehrlichman suspects something. We can imagine the up-thrust jaw and the cocked eyebrow he trains on his shrinking principal when he challenges Nixon: "I've never talked to Chuck about that, have you."

Nixon slithers away: "What did he say he said?" he asks.

In Judge Sirica's courtroom, the President's voice, in the January 8 conversation with Colson, is heard plainly. The usual nervous deference he gives this terrifying subordinate is audible. Colson does not raise the forbidden subject of clemency. Nixon does.

The President takes off on one of his Watergate P.R. scenarios:

"We'll build, we'll build that son-of-a-bitch up like nobody's business. We'll have Buckley (columnist William F. Buckley, Jr.) write a column and say, you know that he should have clemency, if you have given 18 years of service . . . it's on the merits."

★ ★ ★

**T**WO AND A HALF MONTHS later, Nixon is deceiving Haldeman feigning ignorance about rumors of a Hunt pardon. With an embellishment of the hypocrisy usually reserved for the nation, he instructs Haldeman: "You'd better find out from Colson what he did promise."

When he resigned, special prosecutor Leon Jaworski promised us the trial would tell us everything about Watergate. Will it answer the central question, which is what did Hunt and Colson have on Nixon? What was so foul that he could not bring himself even to tell it to Haldeman who was lied to it seems like the rest of us?

Washington Star-News