

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Dec. 11 — Leaving the question of innocence to the jury and the subject of fairness to the appeals courts, it may be instructive to observe the effect of the Watergate trial on the three key defendants and to see how their personalities have determined the contrast of their defenses.

H. R. "Bob" Haldeman—he of the ramrod repute, the martinet appearance in his days of power — has changed his appearance. Years ago, I asked him why he didn't get rid of his Prussian-looking crewcut; he laughed and replied: "Who'd know me?"

His haircut is softly styled now, and he has taken the rough edges of severity out of his mannerisms in the courtroom. He was right: Nobody would know him. In last year's hearings as well as this year's trial, he has appeared soft-spoken, kind, mild-mannered, reverent and reasonable, a far cry from the fierce wielder of power he used to be known to be.

That is because the former admiral places great importance in "image," in appearance, before a jury or any public; though he seldom concerned himself with his own image while in the White House, he now sees it is to be essential in his trial.

Mr. Haldeman feels that his defense requires that softening of image to compensate for a refusal to soften his position. He has chosen to stand with Mr. Nixon, rarely taking refuge in "orders" as a defense. He is consistent in his philosophy that appearances count, and personally loyal to the man whose alter ego he was.

John Ehrlichman has taken a differ-

ent path. His relationship with Mr. Nixon was not quite as close as Mr. Haldeman's; when Nixon turned Haldeman down on anything, he did it directly, but when the President turned down Ehrlichman, he did it through Haldeman.

Moreover, John Ehrlichman sees himself as roped into the Watergate conspiracy prosecution. His "problem" was the plumbers unit, and he has already been convicted for that. His plumbers' defense required a hard national security rationale, which is why he clashed so sharply with Senators at the televised hearings last year; on the cover-up conspiracy charge, Mr. Ehrlichman believes he was drawn in only to help the prosecution discredit the former President.

Which he is willing to do. If his role is to be a latter-day Dean, he will play that role. His defense, which has puzzled some of those observing the trial, is to side with the prosecution, more in sorrow than in anger. Mr. Ehrlichman's lawyer claims his client was "had"; Ehrlichman demands Nixon's presence as a witness; in the trial's most poignant moment, it was Mr. Ehrlichman who showed the need for Mr. Nixon to explain his actions to the next generation.

Those who know John Ehrlichman know that his concern for the way his children will look at him, and for the way his children's friends will look at them, is no false front put on to impress a jury; he is profoundly a family man. That solidarity, however, does not extend to any official family; if his testimony harms other defendants, so be it. In seeking to transfer the blame, he infuriates his former leader, but this does not bother Mr. Ehrlichman because he has decided not to be left twisting slowly, slowly, etc.

And what of the man he described as "the big enchilada"? John Mitchell would not know how to begin to change his image; like Alexei Kosygin, he was born to fulfill the definition of the word "dour."

Nor has Mr. Mitchell changed his story. He says he did not authorize the break-in, and flatly contradicts the testimony of a parade of witnesses who copped their pleas. And despite the disparagement on the tape transcripts that must have stung him, he has not turned on Richard Nixon.

More than anyone in the drama, John Mitchell has turned out to be what David Reisman called "the inner-directed man." Unsustained by a religious faith, deserted by his wife, career wrecked and friends fled, his home a hotel room, John Mitchell remains John Mitchell.

Mr. Mitchell's easy tolerance of eavesdropping brought most of the disaster on himself, of course, but the purpose of this elegy written in a Federal courtyard is not to usurp the jury's job. Rather it is to compare how three flawed but well-meaning men—not one of whom is as evil or stupid as the other two now think he is—react differently in the same situation.

Haldeman shifts his image, Ehrlichman shifts his blame, Mitchell shifts his pipe to the other side of his mouth. Haldeman stands loyally by his disgraced leader, Ehrlichman sadly condemns him, Mitchell refuses to pass judgment at all.

"Put 'em all in a bag," Richard Nixon used to say about slates of opposing candidates, so that the worst of each could be used to afflict the others. But even when bagged, as this case shows, individuals react in an individual way.