

Ehrlichman Said to Shift

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Watergate prosecutors accused former White House aide John D. Ehrlichman yesterday of trying to duck his own guilt in the scandal by throwing all the blame on former President Nixon.

Winding up a rigorous cross-examination at the Watergate cover-up trial, chief prosecutor James F. Neal charged that the White House tapes show Ehrlichman himself admitted

taking part in the cover-up to protect the President's re-election in 1972.

Ehrlichman denied it with an outpouring of explanations for his own actions and renewed complaints that Nixon had misled him.

Chin thrust out, he declared, "I'm innocent of the charges that the government has brought against me."

Confronting Ehrlichman with a string of White House tapes, Neal maintained that the former White House ad-

viser had actually laid out his own cover-up strategy more than a year ago in a conversation with Nixon about former White House Counsel John W. Dean III.

"If I were Dean," Ehrlichman told the President on April 15, 1973, "I would develop a defense that I was being manipulated by people who had a corrupt motive for ostensibly a benign motive."

Neal accused Ehrlichman of doing just that at the cover-up trial.

"You predicted your own defense in this case, didn't you?" Neal demanded. "As a matter of fact, that is exactly what you are saying today—that you were manipulated by Mr. Nixon who had a corrupt motive?"

Ehrlichman insisted that his real defense was his innocence, but he stuck to his charges of deception on Nixon's part.

"That certainly is where the truth seems to lead us in this

case," he testified.

Far more combative than he had been earlier in the week, the 49-year-old defendant presented a third facet of his personality in as many days on the witness stand. On Tuesday, he broke down and wept as he described the painful meeting last year at which Nixon asked for his resignation. Wednesday, he recanted key portions of other testimony he had given. Yesterday, he challenged the prosecution on every point, at times drawing admonitions from the judge to answer the question put to him and not to be so argumentative.

Ehrlichman said it was clear to him now that Nixon wanted something less than the full truth when the President asked him on March 30, 1973, to take over from the wavering Dean as his special adviser on the Watergate controversy. But Ehrlichman maintained that he had no intention of tailoring the facts himself.

He said Nixon gave him the assignment at a White House meeting around noon on March 30 shortly before leaving for his home at San Clemente, Calif., later that day.

Holding up a tape of that meeting for the jurors to see, prosecutor Neal suggested that Ehrlichman had made up the story sometime later. Neal said there was no mention at all on the recording of Ehrlichman undertaking a Watergate investigation for the President.

The defendant said he believed the chat had occurred outside the President's office as the meeting broke up.

"There's the sound of closing doors," he said of the tape. "That sparked my recollection. . . . It's my belief he and I walked out together. . . . I had transacted an awful lot of business walking with the President to the barber shop or from one place to another."

"You've never before said that you stepped outside, have you?" Neal demanded, remind-

Blame

ing Ehrlichman of past testimony before the Senate Watergate committee.

"I don't believe I was asked where it [the conversation] was," Ehrlichman quickly replied.

Ehrlichman said he went upstairs to his own office, drafted a letter to himself outlining his new Watergate duties, and had Nixon initial it aboard Air Force One on the way to San Clemente that afternoon.

Introduced at the trial later in the day, the "Dear John" letter had the President saying that he knew "very little" of the Watergate case beyond what he read in his daily news summaries.

According to the letter,

Nixon also said he was "concerned that John Dean may be drawn into the Watergate controversy in such a way as to preclude his giving me adequate counsel on questions associated with the whole general subject."

As a result, the four-paragraph document stated, Ehrlichman would be called upon for "advice on the constitutional and legal questions involved. . . . You will wish to acquaint yourself with the facts of the criminal case and the various allegations made concerning fund management, the aftermath of the case and other facts. . . . I know very little of the matter beyond the news summary, but I will expect you to be posted on it."

The note was initialed "RN" and below that, carried the penned-in date of "3-30-73." Neal suggested that the initials were in a different hand than the date, but Ehrlichman said he saw the President both initial and date it himself that day aboard Air Force One.

"Are you saying the same person who initialed that letter dated it?" the prosecutor asked in incredulous tones.

"Yes," Ehrlichman replied. "I saw him (Nixon) do that."