

Watergate Verdict Fails to Surprise the

Ervin Calls Evidence Of Guilt 'Overwhelming'

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Lawmakers Who

Investigated the Case

By GRACE LICHTENSTEIN

The guilty verdict handed down in the Watergate cover-up trial against four of President Nixon's closest aides appeared to come as no surprise to the lawmakers who had themselves explored the Watergate case.

Those who served on the Senate Watergate committee and the House Judiciary Committee generally echoed Sam J. Ervin Jr., the now-retired chairman of the Senate committee, who said the evidence was "overwhelming — I don't think the jury could have done anything else."

In Vail, Colo., reporters were told an hour and a half after the verdict had been announced that President Ford, who was vacationing there, would have no comment. When asked why it had taken so long for the statement, Ron Nessen, the White House press secretary, said that the President had been taking a shower.

Like many New Year's Day sports enthusiasts, President Ford learned of the verdict when the football game he was watching on television was interrupted for the news.

'Verdict Was Required'

From his North Carolina home, Mr. Ervin, before whose committee Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Erlichman, Mr. Haldeman and other leading players in the Watergate drama first testified in public, said he had expected the jury to reach an early verdict.

"They've been living with this for 13 weeks," he said. "The verdict was required by the testimony."

Several legislators praised the jury for careful deliberations in acquitting one defendant, Kenneth W. Parkinson, while finding the four others guilty. Members of both major political parties joined in applauding the verdict as an indication that "the system" of American justice was working.

A few, such as Republican Senators Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee and Lowell P. Weicker Jr. of Connecticut, saw the outcome differently.

Saying that he felt sad for the men and their families, Senator Baker expressed hope that "this moves us closer to ending that unpleasant chapter in American political history."

Weicker Issues Warning

Senator Weicker, on the other hand, warned that the verdict was "not a panacea for the repeated trampling of constitutional democracy." He added that the trial "has only obscured the flouting of democratic processes by spy shops and law enforcement agencies."

Both he and Representative Bella S. Abzug, Democrat of Manhattan, took the opportunity to call for further investigations of Government intelligence operations.

Representative David W. Dennis, the Indiana Republican and member of the House Judiciary Committee who cried last August when President Nixon released the tape-recording implicating himself in the cover-up commented, "I'm inclined to

think the system is working much the way it was supposed to. I never held any particular brief for these individuals."

Mr. Dennis, who was defeated in his bid for re-election, added: "I've never understood why it [the cover-up] was done. That's still the great puzzle."

Representative Elizabeth Holtzman, the Brooklyn Democrat and Judiciary Committee member who questioned President Ford sharply about his pardon of Mr. Nixon for any crimes committed in the former President's Administration, said that the verdict "vindicated" the committee's work toward impeachment.

However, she said she felt the pardon was still wrong, even though it apparently had had no effect on the conspiracy trial.

"I still find it disturbing to think that the one person the Judiciary Committee found to have led the Watergate cover-up has been placed beyond accountability to our system of justice," Mrs. Holtzman said.

Mr. Nixon's resignation suspended the impeachment process.

Representative Holtzman also said she found it "ironic" that, as far as she knew, this was the first major conspiracy trial won by the prosecution since the days when the conspiracy laws were being unsuccessfully used by the Nixon and Johnson Administrations to prosecute radicals and critics of the Vietnam war.

A number of Judiciary Committee members said that the trial had been valuable because White House tapes that were not available in the impeachment investigation had been Judge John J. Sirica. But they said that last summer, before the trial began, even their incomplete information had suggested a guilty verdict.

"Of course, my knowledge

was not as complete as the jury's," said Representative William S. Cohen, Republican of Maine, who voted in the committee for impeachment. "But the verdict was consistent with the facts as I knew them, based on what we heard in committee."

Many leading figures in the Watergate case were unreachable when the verdict was announced in the holiday afternoon. Many others, including former Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst, L. Patrick Gray 3d, former acting chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Charles A. Wright, a former White House lawyer, refused to comment.

Peter Fleming Jr., who was Mr. Mitchell's primary attorney in his trial earlier this year with Maurice H. Stans, said of his former client, "He's a very decent man. I feel very badly."

Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Stans, a former Commerce Secretary and Republican party fundraiser, were acquitted by a New York jury of having conspired to conceal a campaign contribution received from Robert L. Vesco, the fugitive financier, for the Nixon re-election campaign.