

The Conviction Of Nixon's Men

THE TELLTALE. White House tapes that enforced the first and only resignation of a United States President have now borne witness against four of his most eminent aides and convinced a federal court jury that they are guilty of criminal conduct in office.

John D. Mitchell, H.R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and Robert C. Mardian have thereby been hauled down from high places and, barring successful appeals, will presumably go to prison for substantial terms.

As one juror succinctly reported, "The tapes did it" — the tapes that the resigned President had recorded to provide an intimate, detailed, irrefutable history of his presidency, and which, in ways hardly anticipated, did exactly that.

JURORS AND PROSECUTORS agree that without the evidence of those tapes conviction would have been difficult if not impossible. The jurors, having listened to them twice — one in open court and again at their behest in the confines of the jury room — believed what they heard and voted accordingly.

Their verdicts have excited widespread and divergent responses. President Ford had no comment, nor did the ex-President, though he was, an aide reported, "deeply anguished." Numerous public figures, including members of the Senate Watergate committee, expressed sadness and sympathy for innocent families caught up in this historic tragedy. Some felt it timely and proper to note that the trial had completely corroborated the testimony of John Dean, the young counsel to the President, who profusely brought the first startling story to the Watergate hearing and whose veracity had since been fiercely challenged by the defendants.

JUST WHAT THE long trial proves — beyond the guilt of four defendants and the innocence of a fifth — is open to debate. On the one side it is argued that the guilty verdicts demonstrate the American system of justice "works." On the other hand it is said that the system has now been revealed as faulty, inasmuch as it sends lesser officials to prison and lets the leaders and prime offenders go free.

Neither argument is quite convincing. Even if the trial had resulted in five verdicts of innocence, the jury system would have duly and properly "worked." As for the apparent immunity afforded the top offenders, it can be said that a President's forced resignation and the verdict of history are a punitive combination of fearful force and weight.