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Case Sentences in Watergate Are Satisfactory to Majority

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An overwhelming majority—79 per cent—of persons in the Washington metropolitan area believe that the four Watergate defendants sentenced Friday received punishments that were either appropriate or lenient, according to a telephone poll conducted by The Washington Post Friday night. 21 FEB

Only 15 per cent of those interviewed thought that United States District Judge John J. Sirica was too severe in sentencing former top Nixon administration officials John Mitchell, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman to 2½ to eight years in prison each and Robert C. Mardian to 10 months to three years.

The results of the poll indicate that people in the Washington metropolitan area followed the Watergate affair with deep interest, had strong feelings about the outcome and hope, but do not expect, that persons in high public office will conduct themselves more honestly as a result of Watergate.

Eighty-one per cent of those interviewed said they felt Watergate and related matters were serious enough last August to

support former President Nixon's action in resigning his office.

More than 90 per cent of the persons interviewed said they feel the same now as they did in August about Nixon's leaving office. Of the few who said they have changed their minds, two out of three of those persons said they feel Watergate now was more serious than they did last summer.

The Post poll showed that the feeling about Watergate was about the same regardless of income, education, geographic jurisdiction or sex. The poll showed that nine out of 10 blacks, who were about 27 per cent of those interviewed, felt that Watergate was a sufficiently serious matter to force Nixon from office compared to eight out of 10 whites interviewed.

At the same time, however, 58 per cent of those polled said that they felt other Presidents had engaged in the same kind of activities that forced Nixon from office.

Respondents to the poll, in answer to a series of statements with which they were asked to agree or disagree, showed sharply defined attitudes about several issues raised by the Watergate affair. Among these attitudes:

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- Elected officials are not more likely to be "more scrupulously honest" because of Watergate, according to 66 per cent of those interviewed.
- People who seek high office ought to be watched more closely now, 68 per cent said.
- The country will be better to live in because of Watergate, according to 62 per cent.
- The American system of government worked well in bringing those involved in Watergate to justice, according to 69 per cent.
- All the important facts related to the Watergate affair have not been revealed, according to 69 per cent.
- Two out of three persons said they disagreed with the statement, "It was impossible for the Watergate defendants to get a fair trial in Washington."
- Sixty-five per cent of those polled said they thought persons in high public office should receive stiffer sentences for their crimes than private citizens do for theirs.

The poll showed similar feelings about Nixon's involvement and President Ford's controversial decision to pardon Nixon. Ninety per cent of those polled felt that Mr. Nixon was more to blame (55 per cent) or equally at fault (35 per cent) as compared to former White House Chief of Staff Haldeman, former Attorney General Mitchell, former top domestic adviser Ehrlichman and former Assistant Attorney General Mardian.

Of those interviewed, 69 per cent said they thought Nixon should have been tried for possible criminal charges arising from Watergate and 69 per cent said they disapproved of President Ford's pardoning Mr. Nixon.

Slightly fewer than half the persons polled, or 49 per cent, said they had "more respect" for the press because of Watergate news coverage, 35 per cent said they had "about the same" respect, and 11 per cent had "less respect."

The proportion of respondents favoring prosecution

and disapproving of the pardon of Nixon was several percentage points higher than a national poll conducted last September by the Gallup organization shortly before the pardon of Mr. Nixon. It was not clear, however, whether the higher figures for the Washington metropolitan area reflected a regional difference or a hardening of feeling on the matter over time. 21 FEB 73

An overwhelming majority of those polled Friday by the Post—83 per cent—said they thought that Mr. Nixon should “stay out” of public life.

Concerning possible pardoning of the four men sentenced Friday, 59 per cent said that they thought that Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell and Mardian should not be pardoned. At the same time, 76 per cent said that they thought the four former officials were getting better treatment than most citizens who violate the law, 15 per cent said they were getting the same treatment and only four per cent said that the four men were getting worse treatment.

The survey was conducted between 6 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. Friday. Of the 351 respondents, 30 per cent live in the District, 31 per cent in Virginia, 19 per cent in Montgomery and 19 per cent in Prince George's.

The questions were designed to elicit yes-or-no answers, or gradations of feeling. For example, one question was, “Do you feel that those found guilty in Watergate today are getting better treatment than most citizens who violate the law, or about the same treatment or worse treatment?” The possible answers were better treatment, same treatment, worse treatment and don't know.

The respondents also were asked if they thought the sentences were “too severe,” “too lenient” or the defendants “got what they deserved.” For Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Mitchell, 47 per cent of the respondents said they thought the sentences were what they deserved, 32 per cent thought they were lenient, and 15 per cent thought they were too harsh.

Only about Mardian's sentence was there a slight variation in responses, with 48 per cent believing his sentence was deserved, 23 per cent thinking it was lenient, and 14 per cent finding it too harsh. The rest expressed no opinion.

Every fifth respondent was offered the opportunity to expand on his answers in his own words or to express “any thoughts on Watergate that haven't come up yet.” Most respondents bypassed this question, but some offered opinions on aspects of the case that interested them.

A young, black, college-educated District resident said: “The men who were sentenced today should not have the right to pick their own prisons. I think they should be given the same punishment as black men.”

Another respondent, who gave equally low marks to the defendants and to former Senate Watergate Committee Chairman Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C.), said, “I feel Richard Nixon should still be in office.”

A Northern Virginia man who agreed that it was right for Mr. Nixon to be forced out of office nevertheless blamed the press for “excesses of coverage and excess zeal in attempts to find something behind everything.”

In apparent reflection of wide public interest in the Watergate affair, more than three-fourths of those polled said they knew about the sentences, which had been handed down only about 7 hours before the first calls were made. Asked how closely they had followed Watergate events, 36 per cent said very closely, 60 per cent said fairly closely, and 7 per cent said hardly at all.

Persons familiar with surveys said Watergate appeared to be an issue that aroused strong opinions. They cited results of the Washington Post poll in which very few respondents said they were not sure of their answers or declined to answer questions.

Although the political composition of the Washington metropolitan area corresponds roughly to the national breakdown, it is not

possible to determine from the survey whether the data collected by The Post corresponds to attitudes across the nation.

The District of Columbia — accounting for 30 per cent of The Post's sample in the poll — is heavily Democratic and was the only political jurisdiction besides Massachusetts to vote against Mr. Nixon in the 1972 Democratic election.

In addition, the Washington metropolitan area was closer to the events surrounding the Watergate affair and had a greater concentration of publicity on the subject than any other area in the nation.

Persons responding to the questionnaire, who generally matched the political, ethnic and economic characteristics of the area, were also asked to rate, on a scale from zero to 10, their feelings about well-known figures in the Watergate case and in the Ford administration.

Former President Nixon received unfavorable or most unfavorable ratings from 79 per cent of those questioned; Ehrlichman from 76 per cent; Haldeman from 75 per cent; and Mitchell from 76 per cent.

Former White House counsel John Dean, Mr. Nixon's chief accuser, drew “favorable” responses from 19 per cent, but unfavorable or most unfavorable from 49 per cent.

The highest “favorable” scores were achieved by former Sen. Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C., who was chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, and vice president Nelson Rockefeller.