

Kevin Phillips

Pardons for the other Watergaters

WASHINGTON— A heinous plot has been discovered: It seems that back in late August, 1974, former White House chief of staff Alexander Haig urged President Ford to pardon the just-resigned Richard Nixon, and Mr. Ford indicated that he would. Some congressmen are already talking about a new investigation.

The conversation was a partial mistake on Haig's part. In retrospect, he should not have done what he did. He should also have asked President Ford to consider pardoning the whole group of "Watergate conspirators."

Of course, Haig could not have known then what we know now. As the slop bucket political morality of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations spills into full national view — Mafia assassination plots, wiretaps, political espionage and coverups — the double standard and travesty of the 1973-74 Watergate hearings is becoming gruesomely and sickeningly apparent.

Under these circumstances and to eliminate the double standard in the only way legally possible, it is time for the President to pardon H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, John Mitchell, Dwight Chapin, Gordon Liddy and any other Watergater either still incarcerated or threatened with that unhappy prospect.

What justice is it for former presidential counsel John Ehrlichman — his legal career and family shattered — to be wandering around the Southwest under sentence while the pin-striped assassins of the New Frontier and the gray-flannel wiretappers of the Great Society remain at liberty to ooze around the Washington cocktail party circuit?

Then there are the two bigger enchiladas, Bob Haldeman and John Mitchell. Haldeman has just asked the U.S. Court of Appeals to disqualify itself from sitting in review of his two and a half to eight year prison sentence for conspiring to cover up the Watergate break-in. His lawyers have a good argument: Six of the appeals court judges abandoned impartiality and discretion to appear at a Dec. 3 cocktail party given by former Watergate prosecutor Leon Jaworsky.

Moreover, this ought to remind us that almost from the start, the whole Watergate legal process has been tainted — by prosecutors picked from the politicized ranks of ex-Kennedy staffers and loyalists, by refusal to transfer trial venue away from the hostile District of Columbia, by disregard of defendants' pre-trial publicity rights, and so forth. Mitchell and Haldeman should be pardoned.

Then there's G. Gordon Liddy. Six months ago, novelist and Boston prosecutor George V. Higgins put Liddy's 6 to 20 year sentence in fair context: "The man's done the better part of what would have been a flat four-year sentence, for a lousy B & E (breaking and entering). While it's the rule that stand-up guys do time, he's done his time for standing up, and done enough of it. It's time to let him go."

Apparently, a growing number of Americans feel the same way. Back in late winter, 1975, California pollster Mervin Field polled his state on the question of whether the Watergate conspirators should be pardoned as Nixon was or should go to jail. Forty-six per cent said pardoned, and forty-six per cent said jail.