

Ehrlichman:

By Liz Smith
Knight News Service

In an exclusive interview John Ehrlichman, former White House aide convicted in the Watergate cover-up trial, says Richard Nixon was ruined by lying to the American people rather than because of criminal or illegal actions by his administration underlings.

Ehrlichman, in New York promoting his new novel, "The Company," also says Nixon "has a lot left to do" in helping to clear up the American trauma of Watergate.

Q. You have spoken of doing public service work instead of serving time in jail. Don't you feel your greatest service to the American people would be to tell everything you know?

A. I tell you I have held very little back in the process already. I've been to the grand jury I don't know how many times. I just try to tell it like I remember it. I have no objection to writing it — that is consistent with what I've been doing — but I don't want to write it unless I can do it right, pin everything down.

Q. You feel that's for the future?

A. It certainly isn't for now. I don't have the resources. I don't have my notes. You see, I made detailed notes of every conversation I had with President Nixon, what he said to me on a given day, in kind of law school shorthand — symbols of my own — as we went along. These are conversations that are not on tapes anywhere. San Clemente didn't have tapes, Camp David didn't have tapes. And I think I do have some obligation to make that information available.

Q. Do you feel the American people are still quite disturbed by Watergate?

A. I think they probably are. I think one thing that has to disturb them is that there are a lot of open questions like, why did they break in there in the first place? No one knows the answer.

Q. Mr. Nixon has never admitted he was wrong other than to speak of errors in judgment. Couldn't you make a contribution to the healing process? Will Mr. Nixon?

A. I don't have any idea what's going to be in his (Nixon's) book or what he is liable to tell David Frost if they ever do that TV thing. But I've made up my own mind that I will do nothing until after that.

Q. If you had it all to do over, what would you do differently?

A. There was a time I had a very strong instinct to leave the White House, to resign, not that I felt there was anything shady, but just because I felt my effectiveness was pretty much at an end. That pre-dates CREEP.

When I first went to the White House, I was very skeptical and I asked hard questions and required crisp answers, and I felt like I was a new cutting edge. There came a time when I realized I wasn't that anymore. I was part of a process, an establishment, and I was accepting everybody's assumptions in a much gentler way than I had at first.

I thought "I don't need this." But I permitted myself to be talked into staying. If I had it to do over, I'd listen to my early inclinations.

Q. Oh, well, that's just an overall instinct about leaving Nixon's service . . .

A. Yes, that's a kind of "I should have stood in bed" reaction.

Q. What about after the Watergate break-in? Could you have resigned at that time or taken a different course with less damage to yourself?

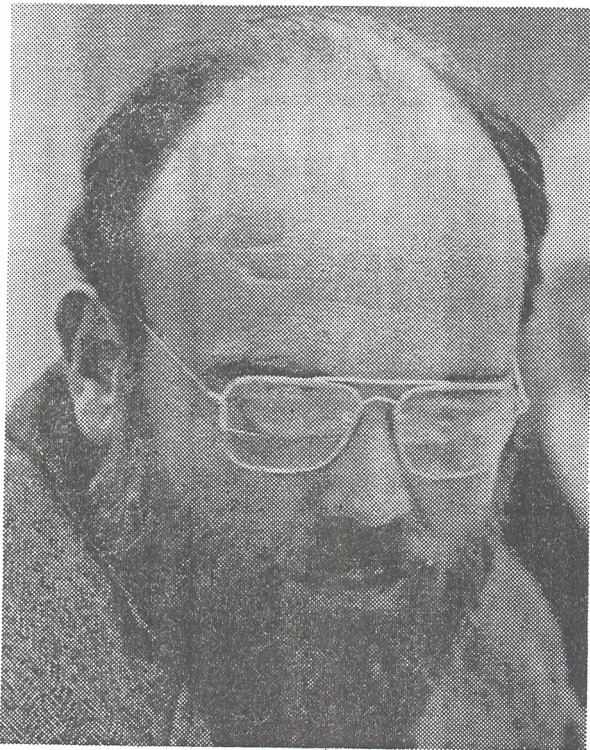
A. Sure, because I had no part in that as an event at all. But the whole sequence is dotted with switching points — I've thought if I'd only known, if I'd had a heightened suspicion, I could have thrown a switch differently and had things go in a different direction.

I can't be terribly specific with you about those things, I can't really encourage media to print such things because I may get a new trial . . . I think I've got an excellent chance for a new trial.

Q. I assume you're not in touch with Mr. Nixon.

A. Well, I'm really not in touch with anybody from that period of my life. No, I haven't been in touch with

Nixon won't



BEARDED JOHN EHRLICHMAN
"I am not angry or bitter at all"

Examiner Photo by Gordon Stone

him since he left the White House. (Cheerily) I sent him a subpoena once.

Q. My impression is that you and H.R. Haldeman were real buddies.

A. We were friends. I talked to him on the phone four or five months ago over one of these civil cases. No, we've not fallen out. Yes, I wish him good fortune, as I do everybody.

Q. Do you feel he is in the same boat you are in?

A. Not precisely.

Q. Do you feel he is more culpable than you?

A. Oh, I can't get into that. One of the things I've tried to do is not make judgments, having had a few made about me. I know how that cuts.

Q. Alexander Butterfield implied on "Sixty Minutes" that the Ford pardon of Nixon was a deal. Do you think so?

A. I don't have a thing to go on, not one hint. I just don't know.

Q. Should the American people trust Nixon again?

A. Well, I have very much the attitude you expressed a while ago. But I think Mr. Nixon and everyone involved in this — and I don't excuse myself — have an obligation to step up to the line and say, "These were the good things, these were the bad things." It isn't for me to demand that of anyone, but simply because, from the standpoint of general well being of the nation, there isn't any other way to close the book on Watergate.

Q. You sound as if you speak more in sorrow than in anger.

A. I am not angry or bitter at all. I have overcome all of that.

A. Well, he's got a lot left to do.

Q. Give me an opinion about John Dean. Do you feel he did anything right?

A. (Bursts out laughing) I like the way you put it. Look, I have a problem with this. In a new trial, he becomes a very important witness, so I really have to avoid getting into that. But there'll come a day when I can talk about it.

Q. Should people infer that the head of the CIA blackmailed Nixon, as your novel says?

A. Well, that's fiction. It could happen. A lot of things are possible. I'm not sure it could have happened in the past.

Q. Didn't it ever occur to you while you were in the White House that the CIA was potentially dangerous?

A. No, I had very spasmodic connections with the

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CIA. I made a lot of assumptions about the CIA then. And I have changed my assumptions now without having a lot of hard evidence to go on.

Q. What about the FBI?

A. Well, the FBI was a problem for us all along because of Hoover. I was well aware of problems there; I wasn't aware with the CIA . . . Hoover was more than a pain in the neck; he was a positive problem. There were times when I thought Nixon would make him retire, but he could never bring himself to do it.

Q. Your book struck me with how isolated the President is.

A. It is very hard to overcome that.

Q. How do you feel you come off in "The Final Days?"

A. I haven't read it.

Q. Deliberately?

A. Yeah. I figured I'd wait until these interviews were over, and read it for pleasure and interest.

Q. Wouldn't you like to be in a position to answer it?

A. I'm sure the opportunity will present itself.

Q. Can Nixon ever make a comeback?

A. I thought so at one time if the right things had been done quickly. I think that time is gone. It can't be done now.

Q. Is it possible Haldeman was Howard Hughes' inside man in the White House?

A. (Long pause) No, I would not.

Q. Do you regret the arrogant things you said about people like Pat Gray, about "twisting slowly in the wind" now that you are, so to speak, twisting slowly in the wind?

A. Well, some of those rhetorical flights of fancy have not been entirely helpful. I didn't know how I sounded. I say things I think are funny, and then they aren't. Your intent and how things come out are often different.

Q. Some people say you are the most likable of the Watergate casualties.

A. Well, that's some kind of accident. I've quit caring. The public's attitude is so diminished in my scale of thinking now. It is less important to me every day. I care very much about the people who know me, what they think. But the whole public-image thing is a

subject beyond my control and sort of off my screen.

Q. And you'd never have said that Henry Kissinger is a fairy?

A. (Bursts out laughing) Well, I didn't say that — because I had just the opposite opinion.