

# Sydney Harris

## Too soon, too late, too smart

People who haven't read "The Final Days"—that chronicle of Nixon's ultimate downfall—and have seen only the more lurid extracts, feel that the authors have been unnecessarily cruel to the deposed President. Actually, the full book itself is far more compassionate than one would expect.

Where animus really displays itself is in John Ehrlichman's new novel, "The Company," where a thinly disguised Nixon is portrayed as a much more reprehensible character than in the Woodward and Bernstein book.

In a pre-publication interview with *New York* magazine, Ehrlichman pulls no punches about his former boss, to whom he no longer speaks. But what really interested me in the interview was a statement Ehrlichman made about himself, not about Nixon:

"I'm more and more realizing," he said, "that I lived 50 years of my life without ever really coming to grips with the very basic question of what is and is not important to me, what is and is not right and wrong, what is and is not valuable and worthwhile . . . I've begun a process that my own kids began almost from the beginning . . .

developing my own sense of values. I'm a beginner . . ."

These are the saddest, most revealing, and most chilling words I have ever heard from a man who attained such power in American politics.

Chilling, because it expresses the general attitude of Nixon and the men who surrounded him, and, indeed, of most men in political life today. They pride themselves on being "pragmatists"—the theory that "truth" is whatever happens to work best for you.

Revealing, because it confirms our feeling that nothing done in the White House of those years had any relationship to real values—that everything was for public effect, to lull the public into a sense of false security, while underneath the sinister outline of a police state was taking shape.

Sad, because here is a bright, gifted and highly successful man of 50 who confesses that he lived his whole life without once confronting the "basic question" of his own identity and standards and meaning, while leading a vicious vendetta against the very young people who were asking these questions about their government and the men who led it.

Disgraced, and facing possible imprisonment, Ehrlichman may be more of a "success" now than he was at the pinnacle of his power in the White House . . . If he has truly "begun a process that my own kids began almost from the beginning." But what a pity, what a loss, what a waste of time and talent, to become "a beginner" in developing a sense of values at an age when one should be transmitting those values to the good of the commonwealth.