

Mitchell, Haldeman, Ehrlichman Win Reductions in Prison Terms

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 4—Federal District Judge John J. Sirica sharply reduced the prison sentences of three principal figures in the Watergate case today after each confessed in tape-recorded statements that they were guilty of wrongdoing and said they were sorry for what they had done.

The three—John N. Mitchell, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman—are the only persons convicted of Watergate crimes who are still in Federal prisons.

The action by Judge Sirica today took place in the same courtroom where three years ago the men were tried and found guilty of conspiracy to obstruct justice in the aftermath of the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex.

Originally, Judge Sirica sentenced all three to terms of from 30 months to eight years. Today, after hearing petitions by their attorneys and tape-recorded statements by the men, he reduced their sentences to "not less than one year, nor more than four years."

This means that Mr. Mitchell, the former Attorney General, and Mr. Haldeman,



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Judge John J. Sirica

the former White House chief of staff, will be eligible for parole next June. They began their prison sentences last June.

Mr. Ehrlichman, the former chief domestic aide to President Nixon, will be

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eligible for parole on Oct. 27 on the charges stemming from the Watergate cover-up case. However, he also is serving a concurrent sentence of 20 months to five years for his involvement in the so-called "plumbers" case. This case concerned a White House-sponsored burglary at the office of the former psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, who disclosed secret Pentagon papers on United States involvement in the Vietnam war.

Because of this second sentence, Mr. Ehrlichman will not be eligible for parole until March 1979 unless Federal District Judge Gerhard A. Gesell, who presided at that trial, also agrees to a similar reduction of sentence. Mr. Ehrlichman began serving his sentence last Oct. 28.

Plea Made to Gesell

Stuart Stiller, the attorney for Mr. Ehrlichman, said today that an application for reduction of sentence was pending before Judge Gesell and that if both Judge Gesell and the Federal parole board acted in Mr. Ehrlichman's favor the former White House aide could be "out by Christmas."

The tape-recorded statements by the three men contrasted with the tapes played at the 13-week Watergate cover-up trial, in which President Nixon and his three aides were heard plotting the actions that Federal prosecutors said constituted an obstruction of justice.

Mr. Ehrlichman said in the new tapes that "an exaggerated sense of my obligation to do as I was bidden" had caused him to commit the crimes of which he was convicted. "In effect, I abdicated my moral judgment and turned it over to someone else," he said.

Mr. Mitchell said, "No set of circumstances, whatever they might be, could ever again cause me to perform such actions or lead me to commit such deeds."

Mr. Haldeman, who was once the most powerful man in the White House after the President, said: "I have the deepest personal regret for everything I have done. I realize the damage it has done to the nation and I will carry for the rest of my life the burden of knowing how greatly my acts contributed to this tragedy."

The Action by Sirica

Judge Sirica, who has suffered and recovered from a severe heart attack in the three years since the trial, announced his decision this afternoon after a two and a half hour hearing this morning. At the hearing, he listened to the tape-recordings and to the pleas made by attorneys for the three men.

One of the attorneys, John J. Wilson, told Judge Sirica that he should consider the "legal unfairness" of jailing three of President Nixon's subordinates after the President himself received a pardon. Mr. Nixon resigned the Presidency as a result of the Watergate scandals.

"I've thought long and hard about that," Judge Sirica replied. But he added, "I cannot condone or excuse anyone just because Mr. Nixon gets a pardon."

Later, he added: "There does seem to be an element of unfairness. But Mr. Nixon paid a great penalty as the first President to be forced to resign in dis-

grace."

When Judge Sirica returned to the courtroom after a lunch break, he read a three-sentence statement saying that "after a careful consideration of all the facts and circumstances of this case" he had decided to reduce the sentences.

The action could be one of the last Watergate decisions to be made by the 73-year-old judge, who assigned himself to preside over the trial of the original Watergate defendants after their indictment on Sept. 15, 1972, and who later presided over the cover-up trial as well.

Pattern Used Before

The reduction in sentence followed a pattern that Judge Sirica set early, in which he handed out relatively long sentences to those persons convicted and then reduced them after they had served a relatively short time in jail.

On his way into the court before the hearing, Judge Sirica told one reporter: "I'm glad it's the last major decision I'll have to render in this case. It's a long, difficult case, in many respects a sad case. I'm glad to see the end of the tunnel."

The tape-recordings were obtained over the last two weeks by Herbert Vogt, the deputy chief of the District of Columbia probation office, who visited the minimum security prison camps where the three men are being held.

The men had written letters to Judge Sirica seeking a reduction in sentence, but the judge apparently wanted to hear their statements of contrition in their own words and decided that tape-recording them would be preferable to transporting the three across country for the courtroom hearing.

Usual Criteria for Inmates

Mr. Vogt, who used a small cassette recorder to interview the men, said that he had sought to determine for Judge Sirica the degree to which the men met the usual criteria for reduction of sentence: an admission of guilt, an acceptance of guilt and contrition for what they had done.

Mr. Haldeman, 50 years old, who is serving his sentence at the Federal prison camp at Lompoc, Calif., and working in the camp's sanitation plant, said that he had "a very strong feeling of repentance."

Mr. Ehrlichman, 52, who tends the four large boilers that provide steam for the Federal prison camp at Safford, Ariz., made a long statement, of about 20 minutes, in which he suggested he was pessimistic about the future of his marriage, said he had reported to prison before the required date because he believed the public wanted it, and said "I have resolved to live my life in a very different way."

Mr. Mitchell, 64, is serving his sentence at Maxwell Air Force Base, in Alabama. "My reflections since the trial have led me to considerable remorse and regret," he said.

Mr. Vogt, the probation official, said that Mr. Mitchell was working in the education department at the Air Force base, "helping them to develop education programs for inmates and doing some teaching." One other source in contact with Mr. Mitchell said that he sometimes gives informal advice to other prisoners working on various legal briefs and appeals.

Mr. Vogt said that Mr. Ehrlichman, who has shaved the beard that he had grown in recent years, had given him a tour of the boiler room where he works, making sure that steam pressure is kept at the proper level.