

John Ehrlichman, key conspirator in the Nixon White House, dead at 73

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The death Sunday of John Ehrlichman provides an occasion for recalling the significance of the Watergate affair, a political scandal involving genuine abuses of power. There is an enormous difference between Watergate and the year-long Lewinsky affair, where "high crimes and misdemeanors" have been committed, not by the White House, but by the right-wing political operatives--judges, lawyers, congressmen, journalists--who organized the attack on the Clinton administration.

Ehrlichman was 73 when he died of complications of diabetes at his Atlanta home. He was a public political figure for less than five years, from the time he entered the White House as a key Nixon aide in January 1969 until his forced resignation on April 30, 1973, some 15 months before Nixon himself was compelled to step down.

A Seattle lawyer who had worked on Nixon's defeated election campaigns in 1960 and 1962, Ehrlichman rejoined Nixon for his successful 1968 campaign. He became White House counsel and then domestic policy coordinator.

Ehrlichman and his friend and former college classmate, H.R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff, were widely considered the two most powerful White House aides and the men closest to the president.

Ehrlichman's most important assignment, as far as Nixon was concerned, was to supervise the administration's assault on its political opponents--in the antiwar protest movement, in the Democratic Party, and within the federal bureaucracy. Ehrlichman established the "plumbers" unit in an effort to stop leaks to the press, particularly of information damaging to Nixon's policies in Vietnam. The "plumbers" were former CIA and FBI agents hired by the White House to bug government officials suspected of leaking and carry out other criminal actions at the direction of the president.

Daniel Ellsberg, the former Pentagon analyst who leaked a secret US government history of the war in Vietnam ("the Pentagon Papers") to the *New York Times*, became the main target of this counterintelligence operation. At Ehrlichman's direction, E. Howard Hunt and other members of the "plumbers" broke into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist,

Dr. Lewis Fielding, in September 1971, in an effort to find information which could discredit Ellsberg's revelations. A few days later Ehrlichman briefed Nixon on the efforts of the burglars, who found nothing.

After Hunt and six other men were arrested in June 1972 for the break-in at Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate complex in Washington, Ehrlichman, Haldeman and Nixon were concerned that the trail would lead from Watergate to other operations of the "plumbers." In an effort to limit the damage, the unit was disbanded and Ehrlichman was ordered to distance himself from the Watergate cover-up, which was delegated to the new White House counsel, John Dean.

This decision proved to have disastrous consequences for the conspirators. Ehrlichman and Haldeman were Nixon loyalists, ready to fall on their swords if necessary. Dean proved more susceptible to mounting legal pressures, and he agreed to testify before the Senate Watergate Committee in 1973. Before a national television audience, he identified the president as the organizer and initiator of a wide range of illegal actions, from the use of government agencies like the IRS and FBI to harass and spy on political opponents, to attempts to suppress the ongoing Watergate investigation by paying hush money to the burglars and involving the CIA in the cover-up.

Ehrlichman and Haldeman resigned on April 30, 1973, at Nixon's request, in an effort to limit the damage to his administration. This maneuver might have been successful, but for the revelation two months later of the existence of a White House taping system which recorded all meetings and telephone conversations involving the president and his top aides.

The next 15 months were consumed by a struggle for control of the tapes, culminating in a unanimous Supreme Court decision in July 1974 compelling Nixon to turn over the tapes to the Watergate special prosecutor and House and Senate investigators. When key tapes confirmed that Nixon had been deeply involved in the Watergate cover-up from its inception, his political support collapsed and he resigned

rather than face impeachment.

Nixon left office without pardoning his key accomplices, although he himself received a pardon from his successor Gerald Ford. Ehrlichman went to trial for the Watergate cover-up, together with Haldeman, former Attorney General John Mitchell and former Assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian, and was convicted and sentenced to prison for two and a half to eight years. He was also convicted on charges stemming from the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, but received a term to be served concurrently. He was released in 1977 after 18 months in a minimum security facility.

Watergate was far more than a failed burglary and unsuccessful cover-up, and here Ehrlichman's role sheds light. It was necessary for the White House to cover up its links to the Watergate break-in because this threatened to expose a far broader criminal enterprise. What was involved was the use of the resources of the federal government to carry out a whole series of attacks on basic democratic rights, ranging from "dirty tricks" against likely Democratic presidential candidates in the 1972 elections to burglaries, wiretapping and other forms of illegal surveillance.

The White House tapes document Nixon's personal role in directing these actions, and Ehrlichman's role as his right-hand man. Among their discussions: how to use the IRS against political opponents like Senator Hubert Humphrey and Senator George McGovern; burglaries by the plumbers at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank; planting agents and bugging devices; hiring private detectives to follow Senator Edward Kennedy; using the CIA to block the Watergate investigation; planting smears in the media through favored journalists.

One conversation between Nixon and Ehrlichman, on November 1, 1972, as Nixon was anticipating his reelection victory and plotting revenge on his enemies, gives the flavor of their collaboration. The two men are discussing measures of retaliation against the *Washington Post* for its Watergate coverage, including denial of a license to operate a radio station:

NIXON: And now they're finished.

EHRlichman: Believe me, I would be very disappointed to see us now forgive and forget.

NIXON: There ain't going to be no forgetting, and there'll be Goddamn little forgiving, except they're going to know (unintelligible). They're off the guest list, they don't come to the Christmas.

EHRlichman: That to my way of thinking would be not nearly as important as coming down the pike--there will be our main chance. There will be a license application--

NIXON: Oh, I know. I know that, sure.

EHRlichman: But I would love to see you fire the silver bullets.

NIXON: How can I?

EHRlichman: Well, your day will come.

NIXON: But John, how do you fire a silver bullet at the *Post* without them saying you're taking the FCC and trying to get after somebody?

EHRlichman: I think you could get away with it (*Abuse of Power, The New Nixon Tapes*, pp. 174-175).

The tapes do reveal some distinctions between Nixon and his henchman. Nixon was obsessively anti-Semitic. Hardly a day goes by without him voicing some demand for a crackdown on Jewish supporters of his political opponents, such as IRS audits of Jewish campaign contributors for the Democrats, or otherwise expressing his venom. Ehrlichman was more cautious in his language, rarely initiating but always going along approvingly.

The generally respectful obituaries of Ehrlichman published in the newspapers Tuesday make no reference to such discussions or attitudes. This is not just a matter of letting sleeping dogs lie. On the contrary, too close an examination of his character would have an uncomfortable resonance today.

The Ehrlichman of the White House transcripts or the videotapes of the Watergate hearings is a definite social type who reappears in the current political crisis, not in the Clinton White House, but in the Office of Independent Counsel and among the House managers. In his vicious and antidemocratic political methods he would be right at home with Kenneth Starr and other witch-hunters of the Republican extreme right.

It must be said, however, that the programs on which Ehrlichman worked as White House domestic policy adviser in the early 1970s would today be considered on the left fringe of the Democratic Party. These included the Philadelphia Plan, which introduced affirmative action into the building trades unions, the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and passage of clean air and clean water legislation, increased safeguards for workers' pensions, revenue sharing grants from the federal government for state and local public services, and greater autonomy for Native American reservations.

The contrast between the policy agenda of the Nixon White House and that of Clinton in his recent State of the Union speech is a measure of how far to the right the whole spectrum of big business politics has moved in the last generation.



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