



MARTHA MITCHELL: THE DAY THE LAUGHING STOPPED



FRED WARD—BLACK STAR

AT FIRST SHE PROVIDED COMIC RELIEF. THEN SHE WAS LABELED "SICK."
NOW, AS WE LEARN THE TRUTH,
SHE IS EMERGING AS A KEY FIGURE—AND VICTIM—IN THE MYSTERY OF WATERGATE

It seems incredible today that when Martha Mitchell first telephoned UPI reporter Helen Thomas, almost exactly a year ago, to say that she was leaving her husband until he quit as chairman of the Nixon reelection campaign, no one took her seriously. One scans the newspaper clippings in disbelief. The wife of the former Attorney General says, five days after the Watergate break-in, that she has given her husband an ultimatum. Asked how she felt about the ransacking and bugging of the Democratic National Headquarters, she replies, "I'm sick and tired of the whole operation." The *New York Times* buries this story on the bottom of page 12. After all, why make too much of anything Martha Mitchell says? Don't we know her to be official court jester, always good for an amusing little story with her late-night telephone calls, always good for a laugh?

The charge in the banner headline of the *New York Daily News*, 'I'M A PRISONER OF GOP': MARTHA, that appeared four days later would have been considered of utmost gravity had it been made, say, by Mrs. Melvin Laird or Mrs. Spiro Agnew. But the *News* illustrates the headline with a half-page picture of Martha, taken three months earlier, her blond head held high, her mouth wide open, the caption reading, "'Well, Shut My Mouth...'" It recalls that her "hubby" was then restraining her from talking about the ITT affair. Ha-ha. Very funny, that Martha Mitchell.

The *New York Times* relegates this same story, in which Martha speaks of the "dirty things that go on," to page 25, and neither the *Times* nor the *Washington Post* nor the *News* has any mention of Watergate in it.

Actually, the Watergate scandal might have been exposed much earlier had it not been for two swift and deliberate moves designed to keep Martha Mitchell from

giving away what we now know to be the Watergate cover-up. The first step was to keep her from learning for as long as possible that the man in charge of her security, James McCord, was one of those caught at the break-in. It was this that led to her virtual imprisonment for a week in a California motel. The second step was to establish a new image for Martha that would insure that anything she said would be discounted immediately. Martha Mitchell had to be transformed from an outspokenly amusing Cabinet wife to a "sick woman" whose outbursts would not be taken seriously.

Both of those maneuvers worked extremely well.

We can now, for the first time, reconstruct the events following the arrests at the Watergate that led to Martha Mitchell's insistence on her husband's resignation from the campaign committee and to the headlines, MITCHELL GIVES UP POLITICS FOR LOVE.

A week before Watergate the Mitchells flew out to California for a series of celebrity engagements tied to Republican fund raising. Martha was much in demand for such occasions. On the weekend that the scandal broke, she and her husband, along with First Lady Pat Nixon, were guests of honor at a lavish, Hollywood-style party in Beverly Hills, with Governor and Mrs. Reagan and such stars as John Wayne. The rest of the weekend was filled with similar political-social-financial festivities.

John Mitchell and his close aide, Fred LaRue, heard of the Watergate incident by phone on Saturday shortly after it happened. The next day, Mitchell, still in California, issued a statement denying any campaign-committee complicity in or knowledge of the bugging; the statement addressed itself particularly to one of those arrested, who had been identified as an employee of the President's reelection committee and the / turn to page 14

BY VIVIAN CADDEN

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Republican National Committee. Mitchell referred to McCord vaguely and impersonally as "this man" and "the person involved" and explained that he was "the proprietor of a private security firm, which was employed by our committee months ago to assist with the installation of our security system." He went on to say, as if the information had merely drifted down to him, that McCord had, "as we understand it, a number of business clients and interests, and we have no knowledge of those relationships."

What the statement did not say was that among McCord's other duties as security chief for the reelection committee was the protection of Martha Mitchell. Far from being "this man," he was someone whom Martha knew "very well," as she later testified. Since Mitchell had stepped down as Attorney General, Martha no longer had FBI men attending her. McCord was now in charge. He had personally checked on Martha's telephones and made sure that her apartment was free of any bugging. He had X-rayed the furniture in it after Martha had reported getting a "death threat" over her unlisted phone.

Mitchell's reaction upon hearing of McCord's arrest was to keep the news from his wife as long as possible. There is no evidence that at this stage Martha Mitchell knew anything at all about the Watergate conspiracy. But her husband realized that as soon as she heard McCord's name her suspicions would be aroused, a host of questions triggered, an enormous blow-up set off. McCord would bring the sordid business too close to home.

Accordingly, he simply suggested that instead of returning to Washington as planned, Martha stay on in California to get some rest and sunshine. All day Sunday the radio and TV carried the news of the Watergate arrests, but somehow Mitchell and LaRue managed to keep it from Martha. As she puts it, "They had me at a brunch, they had me at a cocktail party, they had me at a reception and a dinner all day Sunday. They kept me going all that day."

In her sworn deposition in connection with the \$6.4-million civil suit against the Committee for the Reelection of the President, she says that despite her heavy schedule she did find time to have "a long discussion with John on Sunday afternoon.

"I asked my husband to please let's get out of Washington. I was exhausted. ... I felt I was the only one that was out on the road doing what everybody should have been doing ... when the Vice-President didn't want to do anything they called on Martha Mitchell ... to make a speech, to dedicate anything, any official function. ... It was just too much of a strain on both of us."

John Mitchell's reply was, "Darling, hang on for two more months and I promise you, I will take you back to New York."

Preparing to return to Washington the next day, Mitchell and LaRue had

the morning papers thrown away lest Martha see them.

But once they had left, Martha asked Steve King, her security guard, to get her the newspapers and there she read what had happened, as well as her husband's impersonal description of James McCord. Martha apparently blew up. It seems that for the next three days she gave her secretary, Lee Jablonski, and the security man, Steve King, a hard time.

Surely, had she known about the Watergate arrests when her husband left for Washington, nothing could have stopped her from going with him. Once in Washington, given Martha's penchant for honest talk, she would have raised questions about the connection between McCord and the reelection committee that did not come to light until months later.

But it did not work out that way. In the kind of protective custody in which she was held in the California motel, it was not until Thursday afternoon that Martha managed to call Helen Thomas at UPI to say that she was determined to get her husband out of politics. The conversation ended "abruptly when it appeared that somebody had taken the phone from her hand," Miss Thomas wrote. Reached at their Watergate apartment, John Mitchell expressed "amusement" at his wife's turning to her trademark, the telephone, and assured the reporter of his intention to get out of politics after the election.

At the motel, Steve King, the security agent, has indeed wrenched the telephone out of Martha's hand, and within the next few days he yanks it out of the wall, destroys it, holds Martha down on a bed while a doctor he has summoned gives her a tranquilizing shot and sees to it that no more of her outgoing calls will be taken by the motel switchboard. Martha is a prisoner during that first week of the Watergate mess, and there is every reason to believe that, as she said later, "they left me there with no information" and "they were afraid of my honesty."

Several days later she arrived at her old haven, the Westchester Country Club, to issue her famous second blast, "I am a prisoner. ... I won't stand for this dirty business," and to detail the allegedly brutal treatment that she said left her black and blue and required stitches at a Los Angeles Hospital.

It was at this point that the laughing had to stop. Martha Mitchell, as comic relief for the Nixon administration, was no longer useful. One had either to take her seriously or to invent a new reason for *not* taking her seriously.

On the day after Martha's Westchester Country Club outburst, John Mitchell went to see his old friend and close associate, the President of the United States. It is likely that we will never know what happened at this meeting between the two men. The hard facts are only that John Mitchell then flew up to the Westchester Country Club and, after several days with her, took Martha back to Washington. There ensued another meeting between

Mitchell and the President, after which the word went out that John Mitchell was giving up politics for the woman he loved.

Eight days later Mitchell, relaxed, moved into the Washington office of his old law firm, which is also Nixon's old law firm, and explained in a most low-key way that "my bride was tired of traveling, tired of making speeches, nervous about flying, and I wasn't around much to help. It was as simple as that."

If it was not, in fact, quite as simple as that, still it must be noted that John Mitchell never did seek to attribute Martha's embarrassing revelations to any sickness or aberration on her part. He has sometimes been accused of showing a tolerance of his wife's antics that borders on condescension. But, in fact, according to Winzola McLendon, a Washington newswoman who is a close friend of Martha's and has spent a lot of time with her lately, "he thoroughly enjoys her pronouncements. Or he *did* enjoy them—let's put it that way." Even when he had to label as "ridiculous" her suggestion—in another of her calls to reporter Helen Thomas in May—that President Nixon resign, the brunt of his anger was directed at Miss Thomas for releasing the statement rather than at his wife for making it.

There is good reason to believe that, whatever reservations he may have about Martha's outspokenness, Mitchell continues to protect his wife. Even people who have met the former Attorney General only casually report that his references to Martha are always laced with tenderness and affection. One of her oldest and closest friends, who stayed with the Mitchells recently when the Watergate conspiracy blew wide open, says, "The love in that home is just fantastic."

Both John and Martha dote on their daughter, Marty, who is 12, with an affection that is, according to an old family friend, "more like that of loving grandparents than parents." Marty constitutes a second family for them both—John has a grown son and daughter from his first marriage, Martha a son now in law school. As to how aware Marty might be of the Watergate scandal, the friend continues: "Well, Martha taught her to read when she was only three—and so she reads and understands well beyond her years. She's very bright. Even two or three years ago she was reading the *New York Times*. So how could she *not* know?"

It is clear that John Mitchell was not a party to the transformation of Martha Mitchell in the public's eye from Republican darling to a sick woman who drinks too much. Martha herself attributes rumors concerning her mental stability to the White House. "I have been at the mercy of the White House for four years," she said in May, insisting that staff members have "treated me abominably, half-crucified me, have sent out lies through the press."

She claimed that the rumors came

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from Mrs. Nixon's social secretary and that Mrs. Nixon herself had said at a press conference that Mrs. Mitchell was "very, very ill." A thorough check of all the published reports of Mrs. Nixon's press conferences fails to reveal any such remark.

One extremely reliable Washington reporter who has followed Mrs. Mitchell as closely as anyone says, however, that "the White House was peddling the point of view that 'poor John Mitchell has this nut wife... and he had to resign because she was sick, could destroy herself and destroy him.'" It was, this reporter believes, a more convenient story than the suggestion that Martha suspected something about Watergate. The White House, she says, wanted to make Mitchell out "a compassionate man, putting his career on ice to protect the fragile mentality of his wife."

It is evident that there was a concerted effort on the part of Republican party officials to suggest that Martha was indeed ill and that her remarks, present or future, were to be considered the product of an overwrought person. On the day after her "dirty business" statement, even before Mitchell had resigned from the campaign committee and while he was on his way to the Westchester Country Club to see his wife and bring her home, an associate at the Committee for the Reelection of the President was quoted as saying, "Everyone knows that Mrs. Mitchell has her private, personal problems. These are something only her husband can solve. She can be perfectly charming and then at other times—especially at night—she is not herself."

A few days later a Washington dispatch, used in papers all over the country, reported, "A high administration source confirmed that Mrs. Mitchell has not been keeping all of her campaign commitments in recent months. In Cabinet circles the word is out that pressure has taken a toll on Martha's nerves, that she has a severe personal problem."

By early September, when the Mitchells were preparing to leave Washington, the attack on Martha's mental stability was at its heaviest. The Washington *Star* reported, "Republicans—in the highest places—have been inferring that Mrs. Mitchell has had a nervous breakdown."

With the departure of the Mitchells for New York in late September, the rumors of Martha's "breakdown" at least began to abate, if not disappear. Martha herself, emerging from a summer of silence to say good-bye to some of her favorite Washington correspondents, told them, "I want to be sure that my side is revealed in that people know I'm not sitting here a mental case or an alcoholic."

In New York, the Mitchells put up temporarily in a fashionable hotel suite while waiting to move into a vast Fifth Avenue apartment that Martha has

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described as having "my kind of charm, nineteen-foot ceilings and a view of Central Park" and that John has called the "Taj Mahal." The smiling, relaxed couple turned up at a \$1,000-a-plate Republican fund-raising dinner shortly before Election Day and at a party for Barbara Walters, where Martha quipped, "Why do they keep asking me about the Watergate affair? I never had any Watergate affair!" By December both Mitchells were completely out of the news. A photographer coming upon them dining in a Manhattan restaurant elicited from Martha the comment that "fixing up an apartment is like having a baby.... I don't have time for parties or anything: I'm too tired after working all day."

Martha was seen around town again, shopping at Saks, lunching with friends, picking out fabrics, as cheerful and easy as she had been in the halcyon days before her husband had anything to do with politics. The Watergate trial was turning out to be a crashing bore, with all the little-known defendants pleading guilty, and that seemed to be that.

And then in March James McCord decided to talk and that, together with the relentless digging by persistent reporters, tore open the whole scandal with a series of revelations that led to the highest echelons in the White House and shook the Presidency itself. And right in the thick of the accusations was John Mitchell. For Martha, the interlude of peace was over.

With characteristic astuteness, she reacted by defending her husband against the possibility that White House staff members might try to saddle him retroactively with all of the responsibility for Watergate. Her comments on the unfolding events demonstrated, in addition to shrewdness, what can only be termed a pathetic honesty. Asked if she thought that by her ultimatum she had gotten her husband out of Washington in time, she replied, "I don't know. I really don't know." Pressed on whether she believed her husband's longtime friendship with the President could save him, she countered, "That's a good question, isn't it? That's what I keep asking myself." Flatly asked by reporters whether her husband was involved in the Watergate affair, she answered, "I trust and pray to God that he was not."

These are not the words of either a dumb blonde, a town clown or a sick woman. Yet because, in defense of her husband, she may not stop short of embarrassing *anyone* (as in her statement to Helen Thomas that "if my husband knew anything about the Watergate break-in, Mr. Nixon also knew about it"), the Republican party line on Martha is once more that she is "sick... drinks... not to be taken seriously...."

No one suggests that Martha Mitchell is a teetotaler. Yet those who know her well react angrily to the implication that she is an alcoholic or that her veracity or wit should be downgraded

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on the grounds that she drinks. Mrs. John Swearingen of Chicago, who is one of Martha's closest friends, says, "They did the same thing to poor Mamie Eisenhower. I've been in Martha's home, and I know. If she's an alcoholic, then I should be committed. And everybody knows I don't drink very much."

One journalist, who characterizes herself as "a Martha watcher from way back," points out that nothing substantiates the "midnight telephone call" legend in which Martha is presumed always to be four sheets to the wind. "Only one of those calls was made in the middle of the night," she says, "when conceivably she might have had too much to drink. That was the 'we're gonna fix old Bill Fulbright call.' The first call to Helen Thomas from Newport Beach, California, was at about six P.M. The 'I am a prisoner call' was made the following week in the middle of a Sunday morning. I don't think drinking is a big problem with Martha."

Clearly, no one is saying that Martha Mitchell has no problems. The picture one gets of her now, since the latest series of revelations, is one of a woman battling all kinds of fears. "Up there in that enormous eight-bathroom apartment," one close friend says, "she's really a prisoner now."

The imprisonment this time is self-imposed. When the scandal closed in on Mitchell, reporters started camping outside her apartment. But she seems not so much afraid of them as terrified of being alone. Friends say that she is reliving the bad California experiences, the unnamed doctor, the strong-arm men. She wanders around the vast apartment that reflects her partiality to Wedgwood blue, not reading the paper or watching TV much, mostly puttering, until something she hears, something she fears, brings her to the telephone where it all spills over.

Bonnie Angelo of *Time Magazine's* Washington bureau, who has covered Martha Mitchell ever since her appearance on the Washington scene, says, "I get this Tennessee Williams feeling about Martha, that she's Blanche Du Bois played by Betty Grable. I feel enormous sympathy for her. On one hand, she's tender and tormented; on the other, she's brassy, if not crude. She seems frozen in time—at 1940. Shoes are 1940, the haircomb, the thinking, the Betty Grable dimples, her flamboyant, flirty quality."

Bonnie Angelo has been speculating lately on a question that has bothered so many of Martha's friends: What will happen to Martha if John Mitchell goes to jail, or even if he just loses his status, his reputation and his money? If all this disappears, won't it destroy her?

In the way that stories travel in high circles, Bonnie's question got to Martha in her lonely splendor on Fifth Avenue. Martha, it is said, laughed out loud and said: "Tell Bonnie she's stupid if she thinks that about me." ■