

Liddy: "Some of the persons arrested last night at the Watergate Hotel might be employed by either the White House or the Committee to Re-elect the President, and John Mitchell wants you to get them out of jail as soon as possible."

Kleindienst: "What the hell are you talking about, Liddy?"

—From "Justice, the Memoirs of Attorney General Richard Kleindienst," published by Jenson Books.

By Leo W. Banks
The Arizona Daily Star

Since June 1972 conversation with G. Gordon Liddy, Watergate has remained a persistent shadow in the life of Richard Kleindienst, who was sworn in as attorney general five days before the break at Democratic headquarters.

In Pittsburgh recently to speak at a literary luncheon, Kleindienst, now a Tucson lawyer, was once again surprised to see the hold that that political drama has on Americans.

"It was all I was asked about," he said. "But I didn't write the book to find the Russia stone for Watergate."

Kleindienst's "Justice" is expected to arrive in bookstores within days, and he has cautious hopes that it will be well-received.

He readily acknowledges that there is little in the book that has not already been reported in the voluminous literature on Watergate. But shucking out new skeletal fragments from that affair was not Kleindienst's intention.

Rather, he wanted to give his side to the momentous history he was involved in during his long career in politics and the resulting personal tragedies that have colored his life, most of which ultimately began with a telephone call and a voice saying: "Mr. Kleindienst, please hold for Mr. Nixon."

"The public has an image of me as a Watergate figure who is a perjurer," Kleindienst, now 61, said in an interview. "That's the reason I wrote this book — to tell these events from my point of view."

"I know I'll be judged on a mixed basis. The people who have known me for 30 and 40 years — my family, the people I have worked with in government — know my faults and they know that because of my personal convictions that I'm not a perjurer."

"But the public image of me is something else."

"Every time I come to the attention of the press, the reporter goes back to the old clips and the story either begins or ends with, 'Kleindienst pleads guilty to perjury'."

Indeed, Kleindienst pleaded guilty in 1974 to a charge of failing to testify fully at a Senate confirmation hearing on his nomination as attorney general.

Kleindienst did not tell the committee of a phone call he received from President Nixon ordering him to drop the government's appeal of an ITT antitrust case.

He said he only agreed to the misdemeanor plea to avoid a lengthy trial that he felt he could not endure physically or emotionally.

Yet he maintains that he is innocent of the charge, saying there was no White House interference in the settlement negotiations with ITT because the fateful call from Nixon came before those negotiations began and the president's order was rescinded the next day.

Seven years later, after settling down in Tucson to what he thought would be a quiet life, "It all hit the fan again and everybody started running for cover."

This time, Kleindienst was accused of lying under oath during an investigation by the State Bar of Arizona of his role as a 10% scam to siphon money from the Teamsters union health and welfare fund.

Kleindienst was acquitted in an October 1981 jury trial of criminal perjury in the case, but the Arizona Supreme Court, noting that the standard of proof is lower in civil proceedings, found him guilty of two of nine disciplinary charges.

He was suspended from practicing in Arizona on April 23, 1982, and reinstated a year later.

Again, Kleindienst said there was no perjury, that he was taken in by "a bunch of crooks," and the perception that he is a Watergate figure made him an easy target for the allegations against him.

With his highly visible fall from public grace, it would be understandable if Kleindienst feels the public eye and never spoke about these events openly.

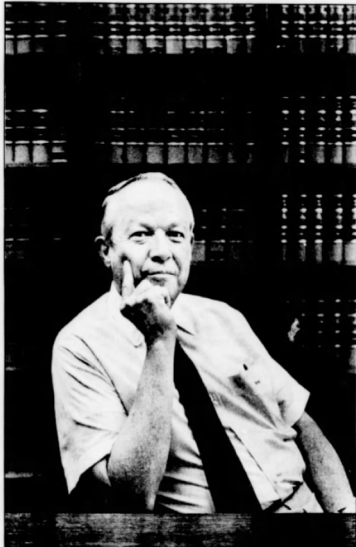
But he is forthright in his own defense and sometimes painfully frank about what it has done to his reputation and, particularly, his family.

Still, it is not in his character to harbor feelings of bitterness, hatred or revenge.

"I'm a happy man," he said. "Sure, it disturbs me that people have a negative feeling about me with respect to something I didn't commit. But I wasn't about to go into a closet."

Watergate still dogs Kleindienst

'Sure, it disturbs me that people have a negative feeling . . . But I wasn't about to go into a closet.'



Charles Leight. The Arizona Daily Star

Former Attorney General Richard Kleindienst at his Tucson law office

The book, written during his suspension, and his candid analyses of the personalities and events it contains, are evidence of that.

Kleindienst's judgment of how Watergate happened hinges on the men who surrounded the president. Concerning some key figures, he was asked to give capsule assessments.

John Dean: "He structured the cover-up. . . a lot of it could not have been done without Dean, or could not have been done as well. . . Deceitful, amoral. . . He makes me sick."

John Ehrlichman: "I don't think he liked people. A disaster waiting to happen."

Charles Colson: "As he said in his book, he would have taken gold from his grandmother's teeth if he thought it would please Nixon. If ever a man was eligible for a Christian conversion, it was Colson."

G. Gordon Liddy: "Loony."

John Mitchell: "Loyal to the president and would have done anything to keep (George) McGovern from becoming president. . . He associated me with participating in the cover-up, but I don't think of him as a criminal-type person. He was caught up in momentous events, did something that was wrong. . . One of the finest men I've ever known."

Richard Kleindienst: "Anyone connected with the Nixon White House during Watergate is not held in high esteem by the public. People associate me with Watergate, but I am not a Watergate figure. Hell, I was trying to prosecute people."

Martha Mitchell: "Kleindienst, I think that SOG [London Black London, newly appointed head of public information at the Department of Justice] is seeing bad things about John being his boss? I want you to call J. Edgar Hoover, to remove and have him put a tap on London's phone."

I protested to Martha Mitchell that I couldn't quite do that.

Of Nixon himself, Kleindienst said he is bright, well-read and one of the ablest men ever to serve as president — but a man with an insatiable desire for revenge that contributed a great deal to his ultimate downfall.

Nonetheless, Kleindienst declined the opportunity to vent fully his opinion of the president he served.

"I must on being less than direct in expressing my true feelings for Nixon," he said.

"I don't think it's appropriate to voluntarily associate yourself with a man for a number of years and then, when things go wrong, say he was an SOB and I was a nice guy who was taken in by him," he said.

Then came the black thunder. As a personal favor to him, (Nixon) wanted me to agree that he would announce my resignation at the same time as Ehrlichman, Haldeeman and Dean is.

Why me, Mr. President? I'm not part of their problem. You can't ask me to do that!

Nixon began to sob.

In Kleindienst's view, the failure of Nixon's advisors to lead the president away from decisions made in heated moments allowed Watergate to happen.

"Any president," Kleindienst said, "has gone through the mill to get where he is and that makes you inclined to do inoperative things. So you can imagine Colson sitting in the Oval Office at 2 p.m., and Nixon is hooked off about something, and he throws a tantrum and has a desire for revenge against me. And Colson says, 'Yes, sir,' and goes out and does it."

"A president needs advisors who are his peers, so when he explodes and has a bad idea, the adviser says, 'Yes, that's a good idea, Mr. President, but maybe we can talk about it tomorrow.'"

Kleindienst hasn't seen Nixon since 1973, but plans to send the ex-president a copy of "Justice," along with a letter.

Asked what he was going to say, Kleindienst said he has struggled with that for a long time. "I haven't made up my mind," he said.

As he awaits the public verdict on his book — "I can't imagine anyone would be interested in my autobiography," he says in genuine amusement — Kleindienst works at the Tucson law firm of Leight and Borden.

His future is open, and he is not counting himself out of very much.

"I'm 61 years old, and I feel like I'm 40," Kleindienst said. "I'm a very energetic person. I want to get involved in something like this change."

Whatever that is, he knows that it will not be at center stage.

"I'll always be interested in politics, but I can't imagine that I could be out from again," he said. "The first time I ever proposed something that somebody didn't like, they'd say, 'You can't believe that guy. The Supreme Court of the state of Arizona says he's a liar.'"

It is a tough thing for a man to say about himself. But Kleindienst doesn't hide from it. He is a believer, ever hopeful. A survivor.