

H. R. Haldeman as a 'Non-Political Person'

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A Commentary

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Several years ago, I spent two days in the Beverly-Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles talking to Bob Haldeman about collaborating with him on his as-then unwritten book. The publisher who had brought me out there couldn't get together with Haldeman on money. The difficulty was that while Haldeman had a useful and im-

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portant story to tell about Richard Nixon, it wasn't a sensational or sexy one so that without a great deal of misleading hype, it would never earn back the huge cash advances Haldeman wanted.

Evidently he got the big buck from The New York Times, which has gone on to make the big buck back by giving us a yet bigger hype. However, if H. R. Haldeman knows something about Watergate we didn't already know, he didn't put it in his book.

After my two days with Haldeman, in the midnight hour and covenanted on's major demo just doesn't know very much about Watergate. Evidently, back in the early months of 1972, the principal actors in the drama had no earthly idea that they were involved in Watergate. Legally, many of them ended up in conspiracy to obstruct justice, but that's a very different thing from taking part in a classical plot.

No group of plotters came together in the midnight hour and covenanted to take actions in concert that they understood would destroy them if ever discovered. All evidence points to a series of discreet, ad hoc acts, many done thoughtlessly. After the fact, all these acts committed by a large assortment of people, many of whom had never met each other, were gathered and put in one container, one mental construct called Watergate.

It is a gap in perception between the Watergate perpetrators and the Watergate prosecutors, juridical and journalistic, that may account for the trouble Nixon, Haldeman and some others have had in making sufficiently satisfying confessions. They're not quite sure what it is they are to confess to.

The Haldeman I met at the Beverly-Wilshire was not a man well equipped to dope out the meanings of what he had done and had done to him. He has, or he had, charm and likeability, but a remarkably shallow background

in history, literature, political philosophy or any other area of study that might have provided him with some guide or measure. He gave the impression of being a smart man, and an ethical one, but so ignorant, so without knowledge that he was without prudence or judgment.

One thing he insisted on in our conversation was his self-definition as a "non-political" person, someone who concerned himself with what he called "process." By way of illustration he recalled the discussions between Nixon, Kissinger and others about the decision to recommence bombing Hanoi. He recalled himself being indifferent as to which way the decision went but impatient they make it so he could start the engine of government to carry it out.

As Haldeman saw himself, once he had made his act of faith in the Republican Party, in a Richard Nixon or a John Connally—he is a great admirer of Nixon's former secretary of the Treasury—once he had made his inner personal commitment, he was absolved from doing any thinking about the issues himself. A Nixon or a Connally were great "conservatives" and that was all he needed to know.

He seemed to have been imprinted with conservatism at an early age, the way a baby duck can be imprinted with the idea that a three-ton elephant is its mother and follow it everywhere. At some early point, most likely in his college years, the imprinting took place. He stopped asking questions and followed his elephant right to the jail house door.

A man who can play a major role in election after election, who can be the president of the United States' alter ego and still think of himself as non-political is a man who would have no difficulty playing a major role in the Watergate drama without knowing it. Which is not to say Haldeman is stupid. He is a smart man but a narrow one and one so without intellectual curiosity it never occurred to him to look around him and see where he was.

Haldeman is a tough man too, but no tougher than his old boss. At one point he said he'd recently talked to Nixon, who had asked how Haldeman was going to vote in an upcoming California election. Haldeman said he replied by reminding the exile of San Clemente, "I'm a convicted felon, in case you've forgotten, and we can't vote." After that, he reported, there was a pause on the other end of the line and then Nixon said, "Well, in that case I'll vote twice."