

Haldeman: 'Conduit' for Taps

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Former White House chief of staff H. R. (Bob) Haldeman has testified he acted only as a "conduit" in a controversial White House wiretap program, channeling information from the taps to former President Richard M. Nixon and then National Security Council advisers Henry A. Kissinger and Alexander M. Haig.

Haldeman, Nixon's top political adviser in the White House, said he began receiving the reports on wiretaps

of 17 government officials and newsmen about a year after the program was begun in an alleged attempt to track down leaks of classified information. He denied he used the material for political purposes or that he played any part in deciding who would be tapped or how long the taps would remain.

"... I was simply an observer of the conversations or discussions of the results. At no time in any of this process was I ever instructed nor did I ever assume that I had any respon-

sibility in connection with the procedure... either of starting or stopping or any of this sort of thing," Haldeman said in a deposition filed in federal court here.

Haldeman's sworn testimony was filed in a suit brought by former NSC aide Morton Halperin, whose home telephone was tapped for 21 months as a part of the program.

Halperin, who left the Nixon administration during that time to work for its opponents, claims the taps

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were illegal, politically motivated and invaded his privacy.

The Haldeman deposition is the last one outstanding from principal White House participants in the tapping project, although attorneys from Halperin have indicated they may further question Kissinger in an effort to clear up possible contradictions between his testimony and that of others.

Where other depositions of Nixon, Kissinger, Haig and former White House aide John D. Ehrlichman have concentrated heavily on the question of the project's origin, the Haldeman deposition was centered largely on the use of the materials gathered and turned over to Haldeman.

Haldeman lapsed occasionally into the ad-man jargon that has characterized his previous testimony in Watergate-related hearings and his answers frequently were precisely

worded responses to specific questions by Halperin's attorney, Walter B. Slocombe.

However, his demeanor during the 106-page deposition appeared to be in sharp contrast to the sometimes bitter and caustic replies given by former President Nixon under questioning in the same suit.

When asked at one point to tell when he became aware of the wiretap program, Haldeman replied: "I can't put—to use John Dean's word—specificity of dates on that." Former White House counsel Dean was the government's principal witness against Haldeman in the Watergate cover-up case in which Haldeman was convicted.

Haldeman said he did not participate in early decisions concerning the wiretap program and paid scant attention to it at first. "I was not aware of any of the procedures or instructions or of the program at all, simply

of the fact of its existence," he said.

As chief of staff in the Nixon administration, Haldeman said he was generally concerned with "all the matters of putting a White House staff together and forming a new government, in effect." At another point, he described himself as "clearly the most able and substantive expert in Richard Nixon, of anybody in the White House at that time... an intimate associate of the man."

After explaining the paper flow inside the White House—a procedure that took five typewritten pages of transcript—Haldeman said he understood that the wiretap information first went to "Kissinger's office primarily."

He said either Kissinger or Haig would occasionally discuss the material with him. None of the information discussed related to Halperin, Haldeman added. "...The assumption in my

mind has to have been that it (the wiretap program) was legal," Haldeman said.

He said one document relating to the Halperin tap, on which he reportedly scrawled a note, was only part of "literally thousands of pages of paper that passed through or probably passed through my hands during that time."

The document recounted information learned on Halperin's tap that former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford was working on an article concerning American involvement in Vietnam. Haldeman suggested on the document that the Nixon administration prepare a response to the article.

In the deposition, Haldeman said he did not remember writing the note or reading the document.

However, he said White House might have had a legitimate interest in such information since Halperin was a former NSC aide and Clifford was a former Secre-

tary of Defense. "There was a high degree of sensitivity about (Nixon policy in Vietnam) being impeded or jeopardized by leaks of information," Haldeman said.

Haldeman said Mr. Nixon told him in May, 1970, that reports on the taps program would be sent directly to him rather than Kissinger.

"It was my impression that there was concern on Kissinger's part and the President's, I guess, that were involving reports on members of Kissinger's staff and that it was a difficult problem for Kissinger to receive these reports when he had to deal with these people and rely on these people on a day-to-day basis," Haldeman said in discussing the change in the wiretap routing policy.

"It was felt it was a better procedure, especially given the heavy burden and the nature of Kissinger's office in any event at that time. . . to have the initial reports come through me," Haldeman added.

Haldeman said his general responsibilities included being "involved in virtually everything the President was involved in. . . I operated totally at the President's direction."

He said either he or his assistant, Lawrence Higby, would review the wiretap summary materials, and would refer them to the President, Haig or Kissinger occasionally.

"I have a general recollection of several discussions

with Haig and Kissinger and /or Kissinger," Haldeman continued. "I don't have any recollection specifically of any such discussion with the President at that time."

He said he had a "general feeling" that the wiretaps were "not of great usefulness", but that he never thought about whose responsibility it was to end them.

"The question of who was responsible for this was not a question that came to my consciousness either at my own initiative or at anyone else's. It just never arose," Haldeman said. "It was inconceivable that the question of the legality would have arisen in my mind."

Haldeman said he operated on "a presumption of legality and propriety," and his own awareness that such programs had been used in the past.

His role as a conduit, Haldeman added, was to "pass on anything that provided useful or potentially useful information regarding a possible source of a past leak or what appeared to be a warning of an upcoming leak."

The former Nixon staff chief said he "didn't consider that I had any responsibilities (in the wiretap program) except in a sense, the passive responsibility not to pass along information that I didn't consider relevant. I had no positive responsibility to do anything about it."

He said he does not re-

member who told him the taps were being ended, as they were in February, 1971.

"It is my impression and my recollection that all taps that could be removed at

that time were being removed and that this program was one such that it was felt that it could be and so it was being (Sic)," Haldeman added.