

What Nixon Said During Tape Gap

Haldeman Reconstructs 18½-Minute Conversation

Richard Nixon's one-time chief aide, H.R. Haldeman, says in his new book that he believes the former president "caused those burglars to break into" the Democratic Party's Watergate offices, and later personally erased incriminating material from secret White House tapes.

Haldeman said Nixon tried — but succeeded only partially — in blanking out an 18½-minute section of a clandestinely recorded Oval Office conversation, and left the rest of the job to someone else.

According to Haldeman's account, Nixon was determined in the spring of 1972 to strike back at political foe Lawrence O'Brien, then Democratic Party chairman, with offices in the Watergate complex.

HALDEMAN SAID he believed that Nixon passed the word to White House adviser Charles W. Colson to "get the goods" on a retainer O'Brien supposedly received from billionaire Howard Hughes. One link to Colson in Haldeman's mind was the fact that one of the burglars was carrying a check signed by E. Howard Hunt, a former CIA agent who had performed some chores for Colson previously.

Haldeman reconstructs the conversation he believes he had with Nixon on June 20, three days after the burglars were caught, and that he believes was obliterated by the 18½-minute gap.

NIXON: On that DNC break-in, have you heard that anyone in the White House is involved.

HALDEMAN: No one.

NIXON: Well, I'm worried about Colson.

HALDEMAN: Why?

NIXON: The FBI's starting their investigation, and I know one thing, I can't stand an FBI interrogation of Colson.

Colson can talk about the President, if he cracks. You know I was on Colson's tail for months to nail Larry O'Brien on the Hughes deal. Colson told me he was going to get the information I wanted one way or the other. And that was O'Brien's office they were bugging, wasn't it? And who's behind it? Colson's boy, Hunt, Christ.

THE GAP became a major issue when the tape was subpoenaed during the Watergate trials and congressional hearings.

See **BOOK, A-8**

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Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, has said she may have accidentally erased four to five minutes of the 18½-minute gap while transcribing it, but she said she had no explanation for how the remaining minutes were erased.

Haldeman's book, "The Ends of Power," is scheduled to be published Feb. 27. It provides an inside account from Nixon's most powerful lieutenant on the events that led to the only presidential resignation in American history.

The Washington Star is publishing excerpts from the book beginning today. The excerpts had been scheduled to appear in The Star and other publications, including Newsweek magazine, beginning Monday, but the release date was moved up when accounts of the book began to appear.

Haldeman, formerly Nixon's chief of staff, is in prison for his Watergate crimes.

IN A TELEVISION interview today, Colson said Nixon did seek information on O'Brien in January 1972 but that Haldeman's account of his alleged involvement in the Watergate break-in five months later was false.

"It just didn't happen that way," Colson said on ABC-TV's "Good Morning, America" show. "What is more, I took a lie detector test early in the Watergate investigation . . . which verified that I was telling the truth."

On Nixon's alleged attempts at erasing tapes, Haldeman wrote:

"My own perception had always been that Nixon simply began to erase all of the Watergate material"

from the tapes when he started to worry that they may be exposed.

"But Nixon was the least dextrous man I have ever known: clumsy would be too elegant a word to describe his mechanical aptitude . . . so I believed that Nixon had started trying to erase the tape himself, but realized — at the rate he was going — it would take him 10 years in fits and starts."

HALDEMAN, 51, was convicted in 1975 of conspiracy, obstruction of justice and perjury. He was sentenced to 2½ to 8 years in prison, but U.S. District Judge John Sirica, who presided over the Watergate trials, reduced his sentence late last year to 1 to 4 years.

Haldeman, who will be eligible for parole June 20, is serving his sentence at a minimum security federal prison camp at Lompoc, Calif., where he performs clerical work in the camp's sewage treatment plant.