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Haldeman Book Creates A Journalistic Stir

THERE IS A WARNING you get when you first start out in the newspaper business and that is that people don't care about either journalism or journalists—just the news. So it is important to say one thing: Even though this column is about the flap over the publication of H.R. (Bob Haldeman's book, "The Ends of Power," and also about the feud between The New York Times and The Washington Post about who stole what from whom, it isn't really about journalism at all. It's mostly about money.

People tend to lose sight of that when books are discussed. There is something about books that you are taught to respect and you are raised to think that just because something's between hard covers and has a binding that it has more literary merit than something with a mere staple or nothing at all. Books have that quality and the Haldeman book is no exception. Nevertheless, we are talking about Big Bucks.

We are talking about a book that was bought by New York Times Books, a subsidiary of The New York Times Co., which, among other things, publishes The New York Times. It bought the book sight unseen and then proceeded to market it through another subsidiary called The New York Times Syndicate Sales. Prepublication rights were sold to 30 newspapers and Newsweek magazine. The newspapers paid anywhere from \$5,000 to \$25,000 for their rights, and Newsweek, the only magazine in the field, reportedly paid \$125,000 for the rights to publish two installments. You

See COHEN, C3, Col. 1

COHEN, From C1

can see right off why The New York Times was wrong when it referred to The Post's journalistic enterprise in publishing an account of the book as "a second-rate burglary." In fact, it might have been a million-dollar heist.

At the time it looked like a good investment. Haldeman was Richard Nixon's No. 1 or maybe No. 2 aide in the White House and therefore a man with a tale to tell. As a result, The Times and everyone involved with the enterprise went through extraordinary precautions to safeguard the contents of the book. The Times itself tells us a tale of guarded linotype machines and 4,000 pounds of type being moved to the Park Avenue offices of the publishers when the printing plant was closed for two days. We are told that the publications that bought rights to the book had to sign secrecy agreements and we are told, further, that the book was given no name at the printing plant but referred to only by number. It

is not recorded if the book was programmed to self-destruct if touched by unauthorized hands.

There is reason now to wonder what it is all about. Among the book's major disclosures is the news that Haldeman suspects that it was Nixon who erased those 18 minutes of tape, a conclusion shared by, among others, my mother. He also thinks that Nixon set off a chain of events that led to the Watergate burglary and was part of the cover-up from day one. I blush as I write these words.

Nevertheless, it is Haldeman saying these things. He was very close all those years to Richard Nixon and his impressions or beliefs or conjectures are worth knowing. He was an important man who served in an important office at a critical time and what he has to say is news.

And that, in short, is the way The Post treated it. It somehow got hold of the book, or at least most of the book, and wrote a story about it. The Times then accused The Post of breaking the secrecy agreement signed by its corporate cousin, Newsweek. That The Post and Newsweek consider each other competitors if not mortal enemies should be self-evident by now, but you can excuse The Times for seeing both as indistinguishable parts of the same corporate monolith.

But what applies to The Post also applies to The Times. If you can't distinguish The Post from Newsweek, how can you distinguish New York Times Books from New York Times Syndicate Sales from The New York Times, the newspaper that has bought the rights to run installments of the book? In fact, some people may get so confused as to consider them all The Times and wonder whether The Times in any of its corporate forms—or any newspaper, for that matter—should get so deeply involved in the publication, promotion and marketing of a book that is, at the very least, more a news story than a literary property.

People may in fact wonder whether the part of The New York Times Corp., which published the great newspaper by which all others are judged, could have looked at that Haldeman book with all the corporate money on the line and found it, say, unworthy of page one attention. People may even wonder whether after paying all that money to itself and after having received so much from other newspapers and Newsweek, whether The Times could have said right off and in plain English that the book, as a news story, was something of a dud. Some people, in fact, may wonder if a newspaper should not stick to what it does best.

Which is steal other people's books.