

Who's telling truth?

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Comparing the Watergate books

NEW YORK (AP) — Who's telling it straight? Richard Nixon? Charles W. Colson? H.R. Haldeman?

Reading their Watergate books, it is often hard to tell.

Nixon says he was flying back from Florida when he learned that one of the Watergate burglars was on the payroll of his re-election committee.

But Colson recalled that Nixon phoned him from Key Biscayne, Fla., "furious that anyone connected with the campaign would be involved in anything so idiotic."

The news, said Colson, "plunged Nixon into such a fit of temper that he hurled an ashtray across his Key Biscayne living room."

And Haldeman: "My suspicion of an involvement of Chuck Colson and, therefore, Nixon in Watergate was dissolved completely when I spoke to Nixon. The president wasn't concerned at all by the break-in."

Such inconsistencies run through "R.N.: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon," Haldeman's "The Ends of Power" and Colson's "Born Again."

Nixon: On June 20, (three days after the break-in) Colson suggested that the four Cuban-Americans arrested inside Watergate might have planned it "on their own."

Haldeman: Nixon suggested "raising money for the defendants and using a Cuban cover for the money."

Nixon writes that for nine months he assumed his major Watergate problem was determining who authorized the break-in, but that on March 21, 1973 he learned from John Dean that the cover-up was the real problem.

Haldeman: "The president was involved in the cover-up from Day One, although neither he nor we considered it a cover-up at that time. By June 20, 1972, he knew about (E. Howard) Hunt and (G. Gordon) Liddy — but never ordered me or anyone to inform the FBI."

Colson: "I never suspected for a moment that anyone in the White House, least of all the man I was talking to (Nixon) would for a moment tolerate or cover-up such bungling incompetence."

Haldeman: "Richard Nixon, himself, caused those burglars to break into (Larry) O'Brien's office." Haldeman reasoned that O'Brien, the chairman of the Democratic national Committee, "became a symbol of hate" for both Colson and Nixon.

Nixon mentions two meetings on June 20 with Haldeman — but there is no word in the published excerpts about a telephone conversation during which Haldeman asserts, the cover-up started.

Haldeman: "In this telephone conversation, on our very first evening back in Washington, Nixon, himself, initiated the idea of raising funds for the Watergate burglars in an indirect manner."

Nixon writes that on June 20 he felt confident about Watergate because both Haldeman and Colson assured him no one at the White House had been involved.

Haldeman: "Even more surprising, he indirectly suggested the idea involving the CIA in the Watergate problem three days before the famous 'smoking gun' conversation in which the same idea was consummated."

Nixon says the only explanation for the 18½-minute gap that would be believed would be an admission that he or Rose Mary Woods erased it. He told David Frost in a television interview last year that "I have no recollection of the conversation beyond what Haldeman's notes had indicated."

Haldeman: "It's just possible that there was something in that conversation which Nixon believed was so uniquely damaging that it had to be erased."

Nixon to Frost: "I didn't do it ... I never saw the tape or touched the machine or put the earphones on or anything."

Haldeman: "I believe Nixon had started trying to erase the tapes himself."