

Book Mall 3/12/78

The Haldeman Hustle

THE ENDS OF POWER. By H. R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona. Times Books. 326 pp. \$12.95

By WILLIAM GREIDER

THE NATION'S leading newspapers have made themselves into important adjuncts of the business of selling Watergate books, much the way television talk shows have lent themselves to the merchandising of self-improvement books. You already know from reading *The Post* and *The New York Times* and the weekly news magazines that you must go out and buy Haldeman's new book.

This urgent message has been conveyed in the size of the headlines, the breathless promises of the gossip items, the length and tone of those articles which debate the merits of Haldeman's "sensational revelations." People will go out and buy a book which draws excited front-page notices, a book which skillfully creates its own aura of intrigue and which sets the titans of the press to arguing among

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themselves over the ethical rules for marketing a scandal.

Watergate is the most successfully merchandised scandal in the history of the republic—which proves once again the power of the press, even as it erodes its credibility. There is credit for everyone in the business, but newspapers have done more than their share to see that convicted felons become wealthy authors. H.R. Haldeman, who was so despised by the press originally, will be laughing all the way to the bank (though he cannot actually go to bank until he gets out of prison).

This merchandising process has one final step to it, this review, in which the careful reader is quietly informed, back in the book pages, that H.R. Haldeman's new book is, notwithstanding the front-page headlines, the delicious gossip and controversy, a fraud. The review will have very little effect on sales, but it makes everyone feel clean.

The book is a fraud. That is a terrible thing to say about anyone's book, but Haldeman's is fraudulent in terms of its own self-proclaimed virtues. The advertisements, drawing largely upon the hype from the newspapers, promise us a book studded with sensational revelations, a book of lasting historical value, and one which offers absorbing reading. It is none of the above, in my judgment.

As one of the legions who spent nearly two years immersed in the complicated minutiae of Watergate, I could not find anything in this book which alters that story of criminal conspiracy in the White

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House, unless one is willing somehow to accept Haldeman's bilious speculations as fact. It seems to me a bit late to trade on half-baked speculations, especially from a man who worked so hard to conceal the facts. It is now almost five years since Haldeman went over the side, ample time for him to get the truth together in his own head.

Instead of new light, Haldeman is selling more shadows. Rumors, conspiracy theories, imagined conversations, midnight ruminations from his jailhouse cell. Every convict re-tries his case in prison and, little wonder, he is usually acquitted, once his imagination discovers the missing evidence which would have persuaded the jury or fingered the real culprits who should be sitting in his place. This is what Haldeman's book is about—jailhouse ruminations on what might have been. It is as honest with

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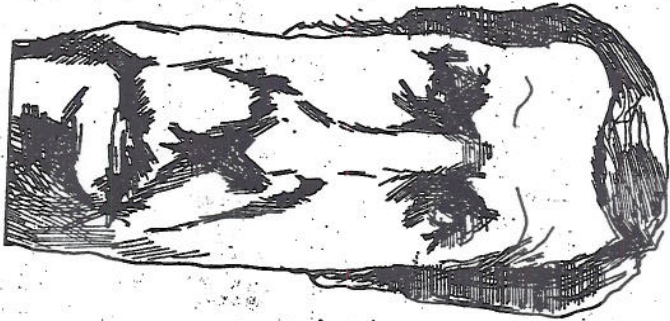
the facts as Haldeman was when he was serving President Nixon in the White House.

For historical purposes, it contributes only confusion. The book is a compendium of every prurient theory—none of them proved in fact. It asks the reader to indulge with H.R. the possibility that it was not the Nixon White House which was responsible for these famous crimes but someone else, the CIA or the Democratic Party itself or perhaps an evil virus in the air of Washington. H.R. offers these willfully, scattered through his jumbled narrative like glowworms of hope. But of course he cannot embrace them totally because he has no new facts to advance.

The publishing subsidiary of *The New York Times*, which asserts a reverence for historical documentation, has published a book without an index. It has three or four throat-clearing introductions, dedications and apologies from Haldeman, but no index. This indicates to me that the publisher doesn't expect the book to be on the library shelf when the important histories are written in future generations.

The last claim for the book—that it is good reading—seems to me the most strained. I don't know how many times people want to hear this story of Watergate, but H.R.'s version is among the least felicitous—an often-told tale,

badly told once more. It relies principally on old and familiar materials, the Ervin hearings on television (where Haldeman committed perjury), the White House tape transcripts (where the true nature of these men was so compellingly revealed) and even other previous Watergate books.



Yet Haldeman and his writer have chosen to assume such a dense knowledge of Watergate facts on the part of readers that I imagine his account will be virtually unreadable to anyone who doesn't know the story intimately. Indeed, the book delivers self-conscious crumbs, now and then, to those addicts whom Haldeman warmly addresses as "Watergate buffs." It sounds a little like those memoirs from aging film stars, trying to keep the fan clubs together.

If you are beginning to sense that this book made me mad, I confess it did. It revived that old kernel of anger which I thought was past, the widely shared outrage associated with that terrible passage of history, when Haldeman and his minions were offering the American people the most blatant, condescending lies to cover their peculiar behavior. The shredding of evidence, criminal bribes paid from secret slush funds, the slick engineering of perjury, the eager manipulation of governmental machinery for personal political benefit.

Yes, Haldeman expresses regrets and second thoughts. He wishes they had done things differently. He wishes particularly that he had not been caught and sent to prison. But the operative tone of the book is catty and the mode is manipulative, much like the way the truth was used when Haldeman was in the White House.

Here, for instance, is the depth of his contrition:

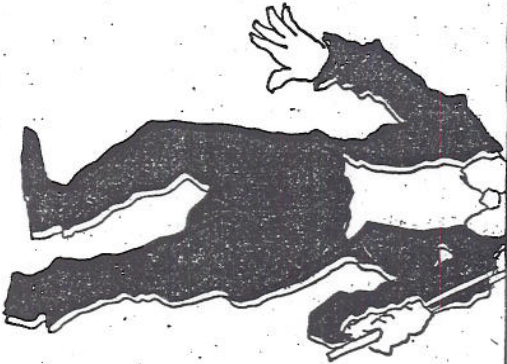
"Had Watergate been handled through the usual White House staff system, it would never have happened in the first place. And even if it happened, it would have been handled in such a way as to avoid the disaster that it eventually became."

Freely translated: If we responsible managers at the White House had been in charge of those crazies, we would never have let them do a burglary. Alternately, if they did a burglary, we would have done a better job of covering their tracks.

That sounds mildly plausible until one steps back and remembers that the burglary squad was assembled originally under aegis of Haldeman's vaunted "staff system." Liddy and his brothers did burglaries for the White House—has Haldeman forgotten?—before they were transferred to the campaign committee where they did more burglaries. The transfer was authorized by Haldeman. He sent them regular memos demanding better results. His files were loaded with their intelligence reports. These were among the first documents shredded afterwards.

So Haldeman is still stuck on the same contradiction which made his testimony so hard to believe in the summer of '73. He wants friends and fans to believe that he really didn't know anything about these scandalous activities, a claim of innocence which competes with his boasts as an effective manager. He is either dumb or he is a liar. The jury decided he was not dumb.

This is what is most irritating, that



Illustrations by Andreas Goldinger
for The Washington Post

Frostie the Showman

"I GAVE THEM A SWORD": Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interviews. By David Frost. Morrow. 320 pp. \$9.95

By TOM SHALES

DAVID FROST may be the missing link—not between humans and the lower apes, though let's not rule that out—but between journalism and show business. Frost was a pioneer in merging the two—the pursuit of reality and the escape from it—on his old syndicated interview show. His British accent and a pseudo-inclusive questioning style gave him an illusory reportorial legitimacy, but we knew what he was really after—the showbiz ham in every public figure and the "marvelous quote" to borrow one of his most overused phrases, that would serve as an ornamental surrogate for that much-avoided television taboo, substance.

Substance can be so boring. And so Frost broke ground on which later would dance the likes of Tom Snyder, Phil Donahue, producers of innumerable "docu-dramas," bubbly-bright local news personalities in city after city, and anybody else who could master the new video art of turning in-

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formation into something as attractive and meaningless as "Charlie's Angels."

Mike Nichols and Elaine May once satirized the trivializing aspects of sycophancy disguised as reportage in a classic routine about a small-town disc jockey who spray-mists his conversation with such dropped names as "Al" Schweitzer. This idea, that all celebrities can be rendered equal through equal media exposure, isn't even a baby-step from the mentality and operating procedure of a David Frost, who always liked to have his political or topical guests perform their "marvelous quotes" the way Sammy Davis Jr. might perform "My Way."

It is no surprise then that in *"I Gave Them a Sword"*—Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interviews, Frost expresses symptomatic admiration for "the quotes of the Nixon era" as if they were Henry Youngman one-liners and the era itself something staged for the world's amusement. Frost is an arch popularizer of the misuse of "quote," but the remark is significant beyond its personification of Frost's laissez-faire syntax. The Nixon years were entertaining—well, yes, and Dresden must have been photogenic—and in pursuing Nixon for a television confessional, Frost undoubtedly saw a glitzy, boffo, jolly good show as the real goal.

He only got one good show, however—the Watergate show—and Frost's book seems largely an attempt to rewrite history by pronouncing the entire series a smashing success and rescuing from the cutting room floor new tidbits of chatter about that fascinating

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Frostie the Showman

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charlatan who became the 37th President of the United States. There are some savory asides, like the morning before a taping when Nixon casually asks if Frost had done any "fornicating" over the weekend, but essentially the book fits in with Frost's career effort to bring life's marginalia in from the margins and to place the peripheral on a pedestal. Insights into the Nixon mystique are generally of this caliber: "A sad man, who so wanted to be great."

Many balked at the thought of Frost being the one to interrogate Nixon after his exodus from the White House, but it really turned out to be an apt match, in a macabre sort of way. Here were two television professionals meeting face to face to see not who could out-fox the other but who could best exploit his own mastery of the medium. It was also to some extent a contest of grotesquerie; on the air, Frost's pasty puss looked like Nixon's with the air let out of it.

Frost insists early on that he went into this as "a deadly serious journalistic project" and surrounded himself with "first-rate journalists," implying that he is one, too. His research team may have been exemplary, but the man wielding the research is to journalism what Sidney Sheldon is to literature. At least Sheldon doesn't proclaim himself a Tolstoy.

Frost doesn't seem to see a whisper of conflict in the fact that at the same time he was girding himself for the task of interrogating the wily Nixon, he was also occupied with signing up stations to carry the telecasts, arranging for ample press coverage from *Time*, *TV Guide* and other carefully chosen periodicals, scrounging up the loot to pay Nixon, and wooing such sponsors as Radio Shack and Weed Eater to buy ads that would make the shows profitable.

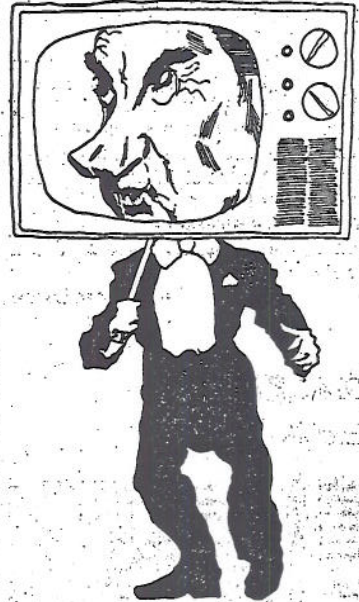
All these negotiations take up many pages (only when it gets time to hand Nixon a \$200,000 check is the narrative

very compelling, and quite funny besides) and include among other curious details conspicuous mentions of the restaurants in which preliminary talks took place: 21 and Trader Vic's in New York; Rive Gauche in Washington; L'Escoffier and Chasen's in Los Angeles. We are also informed that Frost rented a Mercedes 450 to commute from L.A. to San Clemente. Ah, the life of a reporter!

The actual interviews are recounted at some length and include material excised from the TV tapes and restored for the book. Frost unfortunately finds it necessary to take us aside now and then to remind us what a bang-up job he's doing in penetrating Nixon's defenses: "I was pressing on . . ." with the grilling; Nixon was "a man in pain" under Frost's lash; "Encouraged by my success . . ." Frost plunged ever deeper until Nixon was "thoroughly beaten." One almost begins to pity the scoundrel making the fortune from the ordeal—Nixon, that is.

Frost's writing style is faithful to his television demeanor. There are no fewer than 50 separate uses of the word "indeed" in the book's eleven chapters and epilogue, plus generous sprinklings of "in fact." These random-emphatic buzzies are there to give the impression that Frost is really leveling, really hitting the old nails on their old heads. But it's all part of his shrewd TV savvy; bamboozle the customers with external decoration and assume they'll be too entertained to bother demanding anything so drab as ungimmicked actuality.

None of this is meant to suggest that the Frost-Nixon interviews were any kind of gross outrage; to a certain extent they were fun—maybe grisly fun at spots—and by this time it's hard to work up much dudgeon, high or low, about the checkbook-journalism aspects of the deal. Because it wasn't journalism anyway, was it?—after all, indeed, in fact or in deed. It was show business, with all the accepted trappings, from lunch at 21 to the Merce-



des 450 to Nixon's agent Swifty Lazar to Frost's frantic telephone calls to secure backers.

The distressing thing about Frost's book is that he doesn't seem to recognize any of the obvious attendant ironies of the whole affair; he keeps insisting on the integrity of his journalistic soul even while Weed Eater is on hold and his foreign bankers are balking. Also, though negotiations between Frost and Nixon and Frost and the rest of the world are fairly thoroughly detailed, there is one aspect of the operation conspicuously absent: Frost's negotiations for a book contract to write "*I Gave Them a Sword*."

Maybe that's because "Frostie," as he apparently doesn't mind being called, is saving that juicy matter for yet another book—"Behind the Scenes Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interviews." Don't say it wouldn't sell. These days, don't say anything might not sell. □

Haldeman should proffer at this late date the same stale contradictions which were his original defense line, which was rejected in every forum. Apparently he expects the reader to reason innocently through his indulgent version and come out feeling that H.R. has been wronged, after all.

But wait. To be fair, there is something new and different from Haldeman. He has turned on his old master, as venomously as he turned on any of Nixon's enemies.

Haldeman, provoked by Nixon's appearances on television last year, decided to tell the awful truth about him. I assume Nixon will feel free to reciprocate in his own memoirs.

The whole truth, according to Haldeman, is that Nixon was twisted, mean-spirited and sometimes dangerously obsessive in his private behavior. We already knew this. Haldeman adds a couple of bizarre anecdotes to the portrait.

H.R. goes further: he has concluded in his ruminations that it must have been Nixon who started it all, who ordered the burglary while his cracker-jack "staff system" was looking the other way. I suppose some will find this titillating, but it is hardly a shocking speculation. Many of us assumed as much from the start, but nobody was ever able to prove it, not any of the scores of professional investigators.

Now here is the last cruel joke on Nixon: Haldeman doesn't prove it either. He simply offers, as his own malign theory, his personal conclusion that Nixon's the one.

To support this, H.R. offers an imagined conversation which might have taken place between Nixon and himself. But Haldeman isn't sure when. If it took place right after Watergate, this little "reconstructed" chat would certainly deepen Nixon's criminality. It would also contradict Haldeman's trial testimony when he promised before God to tell the truth. "I wonder," Haldeman says.

So may we all. Maybe the next bombshell memoirs will set the record straight, tell us the whole truth about those sordid years. We will be hearing next from Nixon and then from Henry Kissinger and I feel sure those books will be sold hard in the news columns. Let the buyer beware.

