

Nerve Ends Showing

Watergate Probers on Edge—But Why?

By William Greider

Washington Post Staff Writer

The wind changed abruptly. After weeks of nipping harsh and cold at the Nixon White House, suddenly Watergate was blowing right back in the face of the Senate investigating committee.

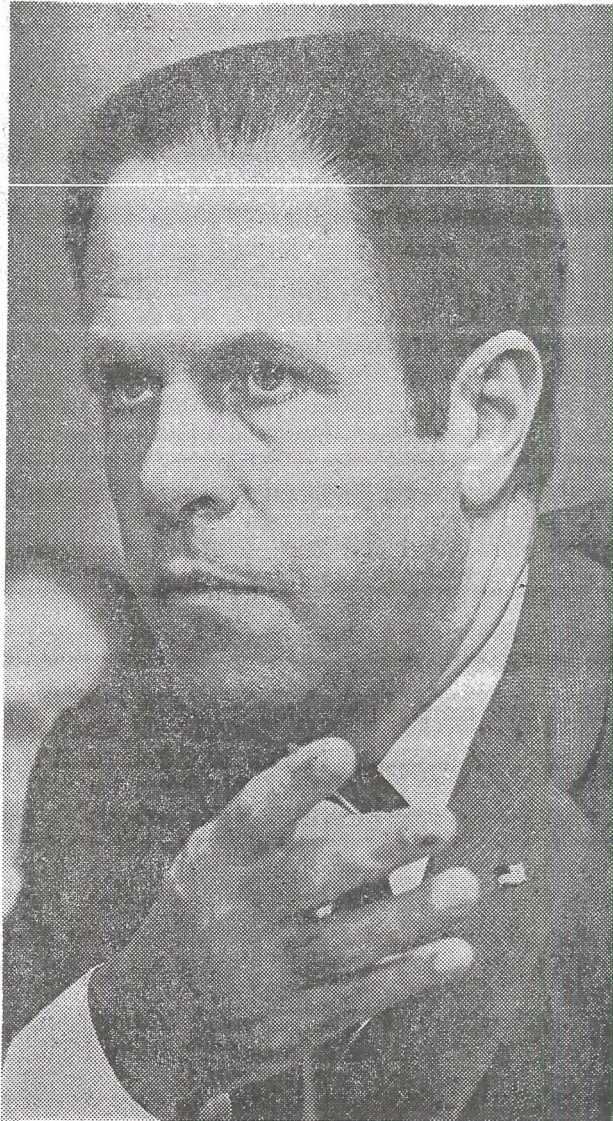
The atmospheric change was discernible in small matters at yesterday's hearing the intramural back-biting on the committee, the hurry-up pace that made the interrogation sloppier than usual, the latent aroma of partisan rancor.

Samuel Dash, the mild law-school professor who has played chief advocate for righteous disclosure, suddenly found himself on the receiving end of the darts, scolded sharply for being unfaithful to the truth and unfair to the witness.

Meanwhile, across the taplot turned out to be placid endlessly portrayed as Bad Guy No. 1 in the Watergate plot turned out to be placid and patient in the witness chair. H. R. "Bob" Haldeman, despite all of the prior testimony about his Prussian managerial style, was as amiable as a bowl of warm pudding. And, on some important events, his memory was just as squishy.

"Would it be fair to say that you were a hard taskmaster and often cracked the whip?" Dash asked him, citing a reputation which is universal in the nation's capital.

"I don't know," Haldeman said in a thoughtful tone. "I didn't feel I was a hard taskmaster. I felt I was a iust



By Bob Burchette—The Washington Post

Haldeman answers question put to him by committee.

taskmaster, but I guess some who didn't rise to the task felt that the whip was cracked sometimes."

The ideal of performance which Haldeman demanded during his four years as President Nixon's chief of staff added a novel phrase to the Watergate lexicon. It was "a zero defect system."

"We attempted to do everything right," Haldeman explained, but he graciously left it for history to judge how close they came to "zero defect" performance.

His manner in recounting his role was, likewise, modest. Despite his reputation as a precision-drill staff director, he easily conceded the fallibility of his own memory, often yielding on small particulars to the superior recollections of men who were once subordinates.

What did he know about the 1970 intelligence plan? Not much, he admitted, a big friendly grin, leaning casually forward on the witness table. "I forget which programs went into effect in which years," he said.

Did he know that Howard Hunt and Gordon Liddy, the Watergate spies, were mixed up in the 1971 plumbers operation? "I guess so," Haldeman said, grinning again. "It is hard now, knowing it so thoroughly through testimony here, to know whether I specifically knew they were . . . at that time or not."

While Haldeman was searching his memory for the answers, Dash got himself in trouble with the questions. The committee's chief counsel has a style of interrogation which is not exactly the stuff of legends. He often builds precarious sentence structures propped up by dangling participles.

Haldeman's buddy, John D. Ehrlichman, found the Dash questions easy to filibuster when he testified, but Haldeman answered them so bluntly that the counsel joked about the contrast.

"Please do not rest on a

no or a yes answer," Dash said. "You are giving me more of those than I got from Mr. Ehrlichman . . ."

Haldeman and the audience laughed, but the vice chairman, Sen. Howard Baker, took offense. The

Commentary

Tennessee senator, who has delivered his own sermons along the way, chided Dash for making off-hand evaluations.

Then, while he had the floor, Baker complained that he was having trouble following Dash's questions without more precise references to previous testimony. Dash replied that all seven senators had cross-reference material provided to them.

"I am not talking about that, Mr. Dash," said Baker. "I am talking about your questions to the witness. That is what I am having trouble keeping up with."

Fred Thompson, the minority counsel, jumped in to make the same complaint. Then John J. Wilson, the aged attorney who so vigorously represents both Haldeman and Ehrlichman, raised his voice too.

"I want to say very frankly," Wilson rasped, "that on one occasion in reference to Mr. Strachan this morning, Mr. Dash made an unfaithful paraphrase of the testimony!"

Dash disputed that. Sen. Sam Ervin, the chairman, tried to smooth the troubled waters. "Let's don't get into a controversy about that," Ervin said. "We have not got enough daylight to burn as it is. . . ."

But a moment later, Dash was under attack again, this time by Wilson over a question which suggested that Haldeman failed to honor the committee's subpoena when he did not turn over the White House tapes which he briefly had.

"Read the subpoena, Mr. Dash," the old lawyer commanded. "Do not para-

phrase it like you have other things this morning."

Dash asserted again that Haldeman was covered by a continuing subpoena requiring him to produce all tapes and documents relevant to the Senate investigation.

"It is unfair of Mr. Dash," Wilson complained to the chairman. And Senator Ervin, after again pacifying the participants, sided with Haldeman's lawyer, not his own counsel.

It is not entirely clear what lies behind the emerging rancor—perhaps fatigue as some said, perhaps nettled relations among the committee members, or perhaps the shifting partisan chemistry of public opinion and the Republican administration which is under scrutiny.

Certainly, the new climate is framed by the general suspicion that the Senate committee may have been "had" by the White House in its jousting over the confidential tape recordings of presidential chit-chat in the Oval Office.

When Haldeman gave his exclusive version of the tapes on Monday, it greatly unsettled the investigators. Everyone is less sure now where that issue will lead, now that the President has managed to get a favorable interpretation spread on the public record without yielding the tapes to neutral inquiry.

"Counterfeit evidence," Senator Ervin called it, expressing the frustration.

"This was a little planned action in which the White House allows Mr. Haldeman to use the tapes denied to this committee," Ervin charged.

And Senator Baker was unsettled by this episode too, perhaps not sure what other White House twists lie ahead. Was it all an elaborate set-up to embarrass the committee?

"I gaze deeply into Mr. Wilson's eyes," Baker mused, "and wonder."