

Rowland Evans
and Robert Novak

Loyalty Test For Haldeman, Ehrlichman

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Trying to chart President Nixon's strategy for surviving Watergate, his advisers are confronting this tormenting dilemma: how can he disengage from former lieutenants H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman without dangerously antagonizing them.

That's because the real, though long shot, threat to Mr. Nixon is seen in Washington and San Clemente as coming not from John Mitchell's testimony before the Ervin Committee next week but from later appearances by the President's two loyal intimates, Haldeman and Ehrlichman. Mr. Nixon must avoid being linked tightly to the Watergate cover-up, essentially a White House and campaign committee plot that ex-campaign manager Mitchell apparently knew little about. So it is Haldeman and Ehrlichman who could finally destroy their chief with a few moments of testimony, improbable though that might seem.

One close Nixon adviser gives this appraisal of the situation: there is no way Haldeman and Ehrlichman, praised by Mr. Nixon May 22 as paragons of virtue, can avoid indictment. The President, therefore, dare not tie his defense to theirs. But neither dare he blame them for the scandal for fear of a murderous backlash from them. He must continue to target John W. Dean III as the cover-up conspirator.

The memorandum given the Senate a week ago by White House counsel Fred Buzhardt clearly violated that strategy by predicating the President's innocence on the Haldeman-Ehrlichman defense. Usually tight-lipped presidential aides were voluble in bemoaning the blunder.

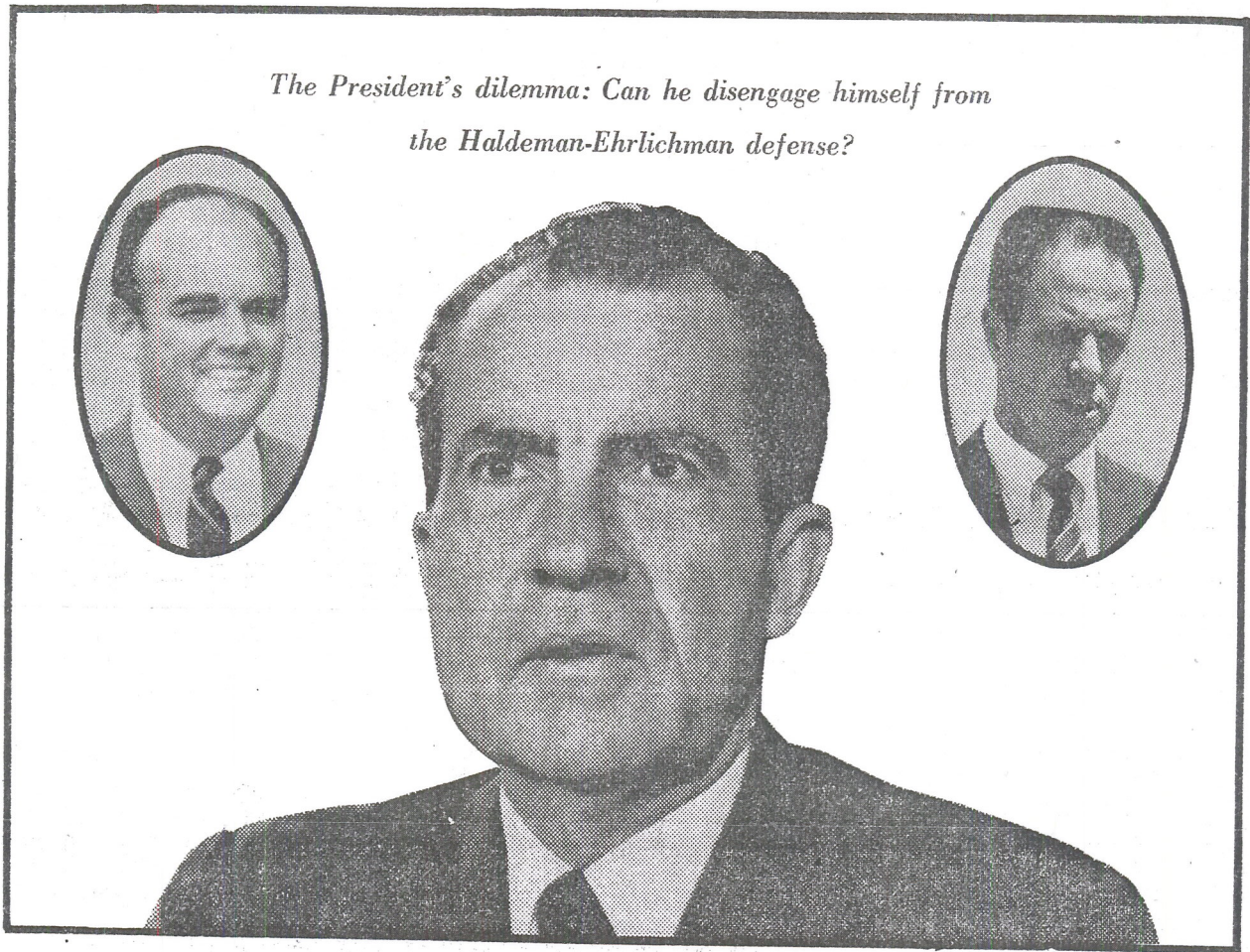
"One thing I know about John Dean," a knowledgeable Nixon aide told us, "is that he never did anything without orders from Haldeman and Ehrlichman." Thus, he reasons, the Buzhardt memo's fatal flaw is its attack on Dean while simultaneously accepting the Haldeman-Ehrlichman defense. Indeed, Buzhardt's chief in the counsel's office, Leonard Garment, let it be known he was most unhappy about the memorandum's underlying thesis.

Some Republicans outside the White House believe the memorandum reflected the influence of Haldeman-Ehrlichman holdovers clinging to their jobs on the presidential staff. But inside the White House, it is attributed more to incompetence and confusion, legacies of the Watergate crisis. "This is just lawyerly stupidity," says one non-lawyer on the White House staff.

But if Haldeman and Ehrlichman are not to be defended, they are surely not to be attacked. Dean, expert on White House intrigues, has said privately that the two former chief lieutenants would turn on the President if he repudiated them. That view is shared by several former White House aides who believe that fear alone would stop the President from accusing Haldeman and Ehrlichman of wrongdoing.

Younger staffers at the White House, so incessantly lectured by Haldeman and Ehrlichman on the imperatives of loyalty, cannot believe they would abandon their own teachings even to save their skins. Haldeman, in particular, his ties with the President older and closer than Ehri-

*The President's dilemma: Can he disengage himself from
the Haldeman-Ehrlichman defense?*



ichman's, is regarded by former subordinates as a Nixon loyalist to the bitter end.

But the President's advisers are taking no chances—as ex-special counsel Charles W. Colson is showing by his television talk-show defense of the President (and incidentally himself). His friends report he believes Haldeman and Ehrlichman, never high in his affection, cannot save themselves. Yet, while lashing mercilessly at Dean, Colson coolly disregards Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

But can the President possibly ignore whether his two alter egos were or were not deeply involved in illegal

activity? The temporary answer seems to be— yes, by a plea of ignorance.

In the wake of his unfortunate memo, Buzhardt was telling newsmen that the White House is simply confused about the Watergate facts. Colson says again and again the President still does not know what is going on. The White House counsel's office complains it lacks resources to get to the bottom of Watergate now that the Justice Department has been made virtually independent of presidential direction.

Even Nixon loyalists find it hard to swallow the idea of total presidential ignorance about what his own staff

was doing. That lame defense also confirms frequent criticism, previously denied by the White House, that Mr. Nixon has been isolated not only from the outside world but from his own staff's operations.

A defense based on ignorance cannot last forever. Sooner or later, Mr. Nixon will have to publicly judge the two to whom he delegated unprecedented power. If he exonerates them, he risks sharing their fate. If he indicts them, the virtues of loyalty which became such a cult in happier days of Haldeman and Ehrlichman will be given a test of fire.