

Hush-Money Charge Denied by Haldeman

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H. R. (Bob) Haldeman insisted yesterday that he still has no idea what many of his conversations with President Nixon concerning the Watergate scandal were all about—even when Haldeman was doing the talking.

Under prolonged and increasingly tense cross-examination at the Watergate cover-up trial here, the former White House chief of staff admitted that he never really thought the payments to the original Watergate defendants had been supplied for "humanitarian" reasons.

Haldeman also acknowledged telling Nixon on March 21, 1973, that "we had to give" the money to get through the 1972 elections.

But when pressed to explain to the jurors what he meant by the remark, Haldeman said he could not.

"I don't know what was in my mind at that time," he de-

clared. "I don't know what I was referring to."

Hammering away persistently, Assistant Watergate Special Prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste charged that Haldeman had been simply voicing his fears that the Watergate break-in defendants would reveal the involvement of high-level Nixon advisers in the scandal during the President's re-election campaign.

The March 21, 1973, conversation at issue revolved around an estimate by White House Counsel John W. Dean III, who was also present, that it could take as much as \$1 million more to satisfy the continuing demands of the Watergate burglars.

The discussion—prompted by Watergate spy E. Howard Hunt Jr.'s new "blackmail" demand for another \$120,000—then turned to the possibility,

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in Nixon's words, of deciding to cut off further payments and "let them talk."

"... It's a way you can live with," Haldeman suggested and then, apparently addressing Dean, added:

"Because the problem with the blackmail, and that's the thing we kept raising with you when you said there's a money problem, when we need twenty thousand or a hundred thousand or something, was 'yeah, that's what you need today. But what do you need tomorrow and next year and five years from now?'"

Alluding to the initial payments in the summer and fall of 1972, Dean indicated that these were never expected to satisfy the defendants beyond the Nov. 7 presidential election that year.

"That was just to get us through Nov. 7, though," Dean said at the crucial meeting in the Oval Office.

At that, Haldeman agreed. "I recognize that's what we had to give... to Nov. 7," he said in the taped conversation. "There's no question."

Confronting Haldeman with

that exchange, prosecutor Ben-Veniste maintained that the former White House aide was plainly showing he knew all along that the payments had been meant as hush money.

"Isn't it a fact, that you knew if the money wasn't paid to the defendants, they would say something that would implicate persons who were not yet indicted, who were involved in the break-in?" Ben-Veniste demanded.

Haldeman kept insisting that he didn't know others were involved until March of 1973 when the cover-up was starting to unravel. Before that, he insisted, all he knew about the payments was that they were made out of some sense of "obligation" on the part of Nixon re-election campaign officials, an obligation to which he never really gave much thought.

"Were you supporting them in some lifetime annuity?" Ben-Veniste asked in scornful tones. "Were you opening some home for convicted burglars? . . . You say right here," the prosecutor added, holding up a transcript of the March 21 conversation, "that you knew if the defendants

talked, the chances of re-electing the President would be substantially diminished because the investigation of the planning would lead right back to his top advisers."

Haldeman denied it. "I had no reason to believe an investigation would lead back to his top advisers," he said.

"What other explanation can you give?" Ben-Veniste demanded, once again reading out Haldeman's taped statement that "we had to give" the money.

"I don't know," Haldeman told him. "I don't know what was in my mind at the time. I don't know what I was referring to."

Ben-Veniste kept pressing. "There is no other explanation,

isn't that the case, Mr. Haldeman?" the prosecutor asked.

"That is not the case," Haldeman insisted. But he left the witness stand at the close of yesterday's session without offering another explanation.

The exchange was illustrative of a pattern repeated throughout the day as Haldeman found himself peppered time and time again with quotations from White House tapes that he was asked to explain. Repeatedly, he countered with declarations of "I don't know" or "I don't recall."

Haldeman said he couldn't even remember what he and Nixon talked about at their meeting on June 20, 1972—three days after the discovery

of the Watergate bugging at Democratic National Committee headquarters here.

The conversation was obliterated by the 18½ minutes of erasures on the White House tape of that get-together. But Haldeman's own notes show that he and the President discussed a public relations counteroffensive, an "attack for diversion" in response to the Watergate arrests.

At first, Haldeman testified that "I don't even remember having a meeting" with Nixon that day. When Ben-Veniste reminded him of the notes he took, the former White House chief of staff said, "that sounds familiar" but declared that he still had "no recollection of the content of that conversation" aside from what his notes might show.

The questioning turned to June 23, 1972, when Haldeman admitted telling Central Intelligence Agency officials, on instruction from the President, to try to get FBI officials to curtail their Watergate investigation before it became "politically embarrassing."

White House domestic adviser John D. Ehrlichman also attended the meeting with the CIA's top officials that day, but his lawyers have contended that Ehrlichman did nothing beyond offering CIA deputy director Vernon A. Walters the use of his White House telephone.

A few minutes after the CIA meeting ended, however, Haldeman reported back to Nixon and, according to still another White House tape, told the President in part:

"... The point John made was The Bureau [the FBI] doesn't... know what they're uncovering... but we didn't in any way say we had any political... interest or concern or anything like that..."

Asked to state just who he meant by "John," Haldeman said that there was nobody by that name at the CIA meeting except Ehrlichman.