

Nixon's assistants try to silence policy critics

WASHINGTON — Bob Haldeman, the most private member of President Nixon's growing White House politburo, has finally surfaced on NBC's early morning "Today" show, and even a casual study of his clumsy prose suggests that he should have stayed in bed.

However, the big administration blitz is on for the President's Vietnam peace terms and everybody is being shoved into the act. The President isn't answering questions from the press on Vietnam or his Indo-Pakistani misadventures—he hasn't had a news conference since last Dec. 11—but Henry Kissinger has been talking like a secretary of State, and the secretary of State has been talking like the chairman of the Republican National Committee, and now Haldeman has come up from the sub-structure with some snappy judgments on the President's Vietnam critics.

Only one judgment

There can be only one judgment about them, he says, which is odd since there are so many of them, with so many different Vietnam "solutions." Before the President outlined all his peace plans, Haldeman observed, "you could say that his critics . . . were unconsciously echoing the line that the enemy wanted echoed.

"Now, after this (the President's) explanation," Haldeman added, "after the whole activity is on the record and is known, the only conclusion you can draw is that the critics now are consciously aiding and abetting the enemy of the United States. . . ."

Well, it is easy to say extreme or even silly things on these casual talk shows, but "consciously aiding and abetting the enemy of the United States" is almost a classic definition of treason, and when it was pointed out to Haldeman that quite a few of the President's Vietnam critics were senators of the United States, he still insisted: "In this particular posture, I think they are consciously aiding and abetting the enemy."

Longing for Agnew

This almost makes us long for Vice President Agnew. After all, when the vice president took out after the President's critics in the press and the networks, the administration had a serious problem. Its Vietnam critics were dominating the news. Hanoi was showing signs of thinking that America was like France in a former phase of the Indochina war and could count on the opposition to force a settlement on Hanoi's terms.

But that is not the way it is now. The President and his aides are obviously dominating the news. Since the beginning of the year, they have been in a commanding position. The President had an hour-long interview with Dan Rather of CBS on Jan. 2. He took over the national TV networks with his State of the Union message on Jan. 20. He dominated the national networks again with his Vietnam peace terms on Jan. 25.

The budget message

Meanwhile, Nixon presented his budget message on Jan. 24, and his economic message to the Congress on Jan. 27. His foreign policy adviser, Dr. Kissinger, argued the administration's foreign policy in a news conference and followed it up with a speech at the National Press Club on Jan. 26.

Since then, Secretary of State Rogers has attacked Sen. Muskie's own Vietnam

peace proposals on Feb. 3, Haldeman has waded in with his charges of treason, and the Republican leaders of the Senate and House, Sen. Scott of Pennsylvania and Rep. Ford of Michigan have backed him up.

Silencing the opposition

All this is fair enough, with one exception. The President has the right to argue his case, and dominate the news, if he can,

James Reston

but silencing the opposition is going a bit far, and this is what they are obviously trying to do.

They are trying to suggest that dissent from their Vietnam peace terms, which they know are not going to be accepted by the enemy, is unpatriotic. They are not satisfied with overwhelming the opposition, which they have done, but are now trying to silence the opposition, and persuade the people that if they cannot make peace in Vietnam, the reason is that their critics in the Democratic party and in the press will not go along with their peace terms.

Should we all agree?

There is something to this, but not much. Any criticism of the administration is picked up by Hanoi, Moscow and Peking and used against the President. Anything anybody says about what is wrong in America is fodder for anti-American propaganda. So should we all agree that the President is right on Vietnam, and on everything else?

This, essentially, is what the administration is saying: Back the administration on its Vietnam peace terms or you hurt the country, says Secretary of State Rogers. Back us, says Haldeman of the White House staff, or you are giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Dissent, even honest dissent, is unpatriotic.

Not Kissinger's agreement

Kissinger has never made such an argument. He has tried to engage the President's critics in private debate, and very effectively too. Vice President Agnew has not only led the charge against the President's Vietnam critics in the Congress and the press, but has been willing, like Kissinger, to face them down in private discussion.

But Haldeman is different. He goes much further. He leaves no room for honest differences. He shoots and hides. He is still back in the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles with Nixon on the morning of Nov. 7, 1962, after he ran Nixon's campaign to defeat against Pat Brown, blaming everything on the wicked press.

He cannot believe that maybe Nixon lost in California in 1962 on his own, or that maybe Nixon's Vietnam peace terms for Vietnam are unrealistic. He is a loyal Nixon man, and sees opposition to his chief as opposition to the nation.

Raises a question

And this raises a question about these men in the White House, protected by executive privilege. What kind of men are they, anyway? What kind of judgment do they have? Haldeman, the young, loyal, resident advertising huckster in the White House, makes us wonder. On the basis of his first public judgment on the nation's problems, he almost makes us long for Walt Whitman Rostow, but not quite.