

Mr. Haldeman and the Secret

The potentially disastrous decision by President Nixon assigning H. R. (Bob) Haldeman to review a critical tape stemmed from a compelling desire to shield from public view dirty political talk in the Oval Office.

Mr. Nixon did not want anybody new to hear the tape recording of shockingly blunt political conversation in his Sept. 15 meeting with Haldeman, then White House chief of staff, and John W. Dean III, then White House counsel. Safe in the knowledge that nobody else knew about the tape, Mr. Nixon early in July called on private citizen Haldeman to secretly listen to the tape and report back to him.

That decision, made by Mr. Nixon with little if any staff assistance long before the tapes became the focus of major Constitutional confrontation, might well have catastrophic political repercussions. Unwittingly, the President gave the impression that only his old confidant could be trusted to hear the tapes. He has thus eroded his deteriorating relations both with the Senate Watergate committee and special prosecutor Archibald Cox.

The otherwise inexplicable handling of the White House tapes becomes understandable only in terms of their exist-

ence being absolutely secret until accidentally revealed July 16. Mr. Nixon apparently regarded the tapes as devices to refresh his memory rather than potential evidence in the courts.

On that basis in April, he asked Haldeman—still his powerful chief of staff—to review the tape of the President's March 21 meeting with Dean. But senior aides at the White House insist that no tapes were audited in preparing the President's much criticized May 22 Watergate statement.

The President has informed aides that he went to his still secret recordings after The Washington Post of June 3 reported Dean's statements to investigators about meetings with the President. To check information that he thought absolutely incorrect, Mr. Nixon informed his advisers, he himself listened to recordings prior to Dean's Senate testimony.

But the tape that apparently worried the President the most was the recording of his Sept. 15 conversation with Dean and Haldeman. Dean's testimony interpreted Mr. Nixon as being well aware at that meeting of the Watergate cover-up. But there was much else said in the Oval Office that day, not related to Watergate, which Mr. Nixon felt could only damage the Presidency.

Tapes

By all accounts, Mr. Nixon and Haldeman engaged in a mid-campaign discussion of the seamy side of politics which the public does not generally associate with the Presidency. Mr. Nixon emphatically urged Haldeman to look into the records of Sen. George McGovern and other pols, using military records and income tax returns.

Thus did Mr. Nixon want to refresh his memory about the Sept. 15 meeting without revealing the contents to anybody else. Why he did not listen to the tape himself is not clear. Instead, he assigned ex-aide Haldeman to listen and report back to him. With the existence of the tape still secret, the President apparently never planned to reveal Haldeman's secret mission.

It was clearly Mr. Nixon's personal decision. Two senior aides now sitting in on Watergate decision-making first learned of Haldeman's audit along with the rest of the world Monday evening. A third senior aide did know about it, but only well after the deed had been done. Even those White House staffers lusting after a refutation of Dean could not imagine a less credible device than Haldeman's testimony.

What is becoming clear is that the differences between Dean and the President over both the March 21 and Sept. 15 meetings involve not so much the actual words as their context and interpretation. As a result, old Nixon loyalist Haldeman as a principal in the case with a deep-seated personal interest in refuting Dean is scarcely an even-handed interpreter.

Moreover, Haldeman's mission tends to undercut the later pledge to Cox by White House counsel Fred Buzhardt that the tapes were kept in absolute security by the Secret Service. Similarly, after recovering from their early shock last Monday night, several members of the Ervin Committee were expressing outrage.

Before Haldeman's revelation, the White House seemed to be moving toward some compromise which would give Cox, though not the Ervin committee, private access to the tapes to sort out what directly applies to Watergate rather than wait for an ultimate Supreme Court decision ordering release of the tapes. Haldeman's bombshell, while not making such a deal any easier, does not decrease the need for it.