

# CBS And Haldeman

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 6—In recent years prominent figures in the news have begun peddling their appearances on television for fat fees, and even the Soviet Government will now sell you a TV act by a tame poet if you'll pay their price.

At first glance this seems no more commercial than, say, The New York Times buying the newspaper publication rights to Winston Churchill's memoirs, but when CBS pays around \$25,000 for an hour's interview with H. R. Haldeman, this raises some awkward questions.

Isn't this a dangerous precedent? Isn't it buying, not a property, like memoirs, but buying news? If CBS will pay this kind of money for Mr. Haldeman, won't other big shots or notorious characters demand their price? And what will this do to the little stations that can't afford to pay the freight?

These questions are not for NBC or ABC, who say they are no longer buying politicians like actors, nor are they addressed to Mr. Haldeman. He is a private citizen and has every

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right to sell his story to the highest bidder, but CBS which is forever (and properly) demanding equal rights under the First Amendment, is now introducing the unequal principle that news belongs to the outfit with the biggest bankroll.

CBS says it does not buy news, but only "memoir-type broadcasts," like its excellent interviews with the late Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson; but Mike Wallace, who interviewed Mr. Haldeman, is not the sort to waste much time on Bob Haldeman's childhood or his lectures or moral philosophy.

The plain fact is that anything Mr. Haldeman says about Watergate, which presumably was discussed, is news. When he walked out of Judge Sirica's Court-room as a convicted felon, his answer to all questions was "no comment," but he had his price for his news and CBS paid it.

In the short run, this interview will add to the flow of public information, which is all to the good, but in the long run, if it establishes the principle of paid interviews by newsworthy figures, it could do the opposite. For if the Haldemans can get \$25,000 an hour, why should others recite for

nothing?

It is true, of course, that nothing in the universe will ever keep politicians from talking whenever the red eye of the TV camera is on, and many of them would even pay for the privilege. The danger is that the flow of much important information will be commercialized and the public will be left with the best interviews money can buy.

The competition for exclusive news between networks or between newspapers has always been keen and often savage, but usually the prize has gone to the side with the best legs, brains, and imagination. Whenever money has been introduced into the competition it has had as corrupting an influence on reporting as it has on politics.

The paid informer was a common if shady figure in the old days of yellow journalism. If a paper couldn't ferret out the news, it could often buy it from some tipster, but that practice faded early in this century and is virtually non-existent today.

The habit of buying advantage reappeared in a wholly different form in British television. There it became standard practice for the stations to pay modest fees to prominent figures who submitted to interviews, even to politicians discussing the public's business on the public BBC network.

In the United States, interviewers have been paid modest fees, but seldom those being interviewed except in the case of former Presidents who were not discussing the news but actually producing historical documents for which they were paid in triple figures.

There is another aspect to these exclusive TV specials with Mr. Haldeman and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the refugee Soviet poet, who quickly learned the rewards of Capitalism when he reached Switzerland. These are potentially valuable performances not only for the performer but for the network. For they are usually sponsored broadcasts in which the network can afford to pay the \$25,000 and still make a large profit.

NBC and ABC may not be playing this game now, but it is hard to imagine that they will not get back in the bidding if the CBS practice continues, and the interesting thing about this is that CBS actually has a written policy against paying for news.

It was carefully drafted years ago after considerable controversy involving the late Edward R. Murrow, Eric Sevareid, Walter Cronkite and many others. It drew a clear distinction between news and historical memoirs and CBS says it is still in force, apparently on the assumption that Mr. Haldeman is not news.

This troubles many of the stars of CBS because of its effect on the TV audience. For if these public figures are paid large sums of money, there is always the danger that the public will see them as paid performers. The practice blurs the line between entertainment and information—a line CBS itself has tried hard to keep straight and clear in the past.