

NYTimes

TV 'Plea Bargaining'

Just a year ago on the CBS News program, "Sixty Minutes," reporter Mike Wallace discussed the ratings war between the networks and asked the question, "How far do you go to attract an audience?" Last Sunday, following payment of a reported \$25,000 to the subject of an interview, Mr. Wallace provided an unwitting answer: Pretty far.

In his interview with former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, Mr. Wallace also revealed the answer to the relevant question of ethical standards raised by CBS News itself: Was this a biographical "memoir," only indirectly related to the current appeals before the courts, or was it an ordinary news interview? To avoid charges of "checkbook journalism"—that is, buying and selling news to the highest bidder but otherwise remaining silent—CBS News maintained that the Haldeman interview was merely a "memoir."

In fact, the program turned out to be almost exclusively about Watergate, the tape recordings, the role played by various White House aides in the cover-up, etc.—the very substance of the recent hearings and court cases. The program disclosed almost nothing heretofore unknown. Mr. Haldeman, who is appealing his conviction for conspiracy, perjury and obstruction of justice after being sentenced to a minimum of 2½ years in prison, naturally repeated his innocence.

He used the interview as a platform to "plea bargain" while Mr. Wallace cast himself in the role of prosecutor and judge. CBS News—and the public—were had.