

## Reg Murphy / Story of moral thievery



Every flatfooted old statehouse reporter knows this copybook truism: "You catch 'em only when the thieves fall out."

They say it differently in the spy business: "Wait till they start running guns to both sides."

But the terminology is unimportant alongside the fact. After President Richard Nixon cut loose his two top aides, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, there never was a doubt that they would begin to blame each other.

Nixon said pious things. Haldeman went to the lonesome stone before he cut loose in print. Nothing could have drained the venom except for public face-saving in the form of books, tapes, broadcasts and interviews. Nor will it stop at the present level of Haldeman writing his book in which he declares that Nixon himself was responsible for the Watergate burglary and the eventual attempt to

erase 18 minutes of incriminating tape.

This is not to call Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman monetary thieves in the normal context. Rather, it is clear that they all were busy spying on each other and thinking of ways to protect themselves—in the loftiest power aerie in the world, the White House.

Haldeman claims that Nixon "had become compulsively and incessantly worried about (John) Dean's mythical tape recorder."

Imagine it if you can. The president of the United States fretting over whether his legal counsel has a tiny tape recorder in his briefcase or his jacket pocket. God, what a small man.

Or try this one. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger so worried about the president's use of logs that he talks Nixon into having the automatic tape recorders installed in the Oval Office. Kissinger afraid that Nixon will distort the record against him!

Or try this. Haldeman claims that Nixon once admitted in private that he may have been the one who ordered the break-in to swipe Daniel Ellsberg's files from his psychiatrist.

To be sure, the new Haldeman book is self-serving. It probably benefits considerably from second insight into how the others behave themselves. Nonetheless, it has the ring of truth when it relates specific anecdotal material.

For example, how could Haldeman make up the details of a pet Ehrlichman project: He collected nude photographs of young women who had dated Kissinger, and then sent Kissinger the photos in official envelopes with bawdy instructions on what should be done with them.

Nor is it hard to give credit to his description of staffer Charles Colson: "Dealing with Colson was no fun for the White House staffers at any level. If he was superior in rank, he would bully them. If he was inferior, he would smile—and remind them that he had 'the ear of the President.' Which he did."

These specific allegations are important, and severe. But they are nowhere as important individually as they are in the collective atmosphere within the White House. The Haldeman book simply makes it clear that the White House was a paranoiac's dream.

Nixon's White House may very well have been one of the most perilous times in American history, not solely because a president was faced with impeachment and hauled down from high office. Those people were afraid of their shadows. They wanted to somehow to save themselves more than they wanted to shape policy.

Beyond all else, they didn't trust each other. They had every reason not to. It was a group that did not believe mutual trust was a trait to be cultivated. The moral thieves have fallen out.