

B-B-Bebe and That \$200,000

During the climactic months of Watergate, rumors of a secret "slush fund" used by Richard Nixon and maintained by his crony, C.G. (Bebe) Rebozo, persistently cropped up—only to be denied by the White House. At the Watergate cover-up trial last week, however, the prosecution disclosed an April 17, 1973, taped conversation in which Nixon offered his departing aides H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman as much as \$200,000 or \$300,000 for their impending legal fees. When the pair demurred, a stuttering and hesitant Nixon added: "No strain. Doesn't come outa me. I didn't, I never intended to use the money at all. As a matter of fact, I told

campaign officials Robert Mardian and Kenneth Parkinson—took the ruling as another basis for appeal, and the trial went on, with Haldeman ending his defense and Ehrlichman beginning his own.

Memory: Haldeman was an enthusiastic witness, visibly unruffled by four days of cross-examination by assistant Watergate prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste. But he displayed a recollection so faulty that he was sometimes unable to explain his own taped remarks; the transcripts, said a defense source, "just wiped him out." On March 21, 1973, Ben-Veniste asked, hadn't Haldeman discussed with Nixon and former White House counsel John Dean how they

I mean." Under Ben-Veniste's orders, Haldeman read aloud from the transcripts. At one point, Nixon said the taped March 21 conversation with Dean was a source of concern, but "if we could preempt that one, we've got him . . ." Haldeman faltered. "In a very uncomfortable position?" Ben-Veniste suggested. "I'll accept that," Haldeman said, grinning; Nixon had actually concluded, "We've got him right by the balls."

Nixon renewed his offer of money in a later conversation with Haldeman and Ehrlichman. "As I said, there's a few . . . as much I think as 200 there's available in '74 campaign already," he began. "That compounds the problem," Haldeman replied. "That really does." By that remark, Ben-Veniste insisted, Haldeman was referring to the other



Wally McNamee—Newsweek

Witnesses Haldeman, Colson: "Be sure you say, 'I can't recall'"

B-B-Bebe, uh, basically, be sure that people like, uh, who have contributed money over the contributing years are, uh, favored and so forth in general. And he's used it for the purpose of getting things out paid for in check and all that sort of thing."

The transcript raised new questions about the identities of the contributors and the favors they might have received, and the answers may yet emerge in the continuing investigation of Rebozo by both the special prosecutor's office and the Internal Revenue Service. That Nixon himself might explain his remark grew increasingly unlikely. U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica last week denied defense motions to delay the trial for the ailing ex-President's testimony, ruling that it was neither "indispensable" nor unimpeachable. Haldeman and Ehrlichman—co-defendants with former Attorney General John Mitchell and cam-

might circumvent the Senate Watergate inquiry by answering, "I can't recall"? "I don't recall," Haldeman replied. Ben-Veniste then read Nixon's taped instructions: "Just be damned sure you say, 'I don't . . . remember. I can't recall.'"

Ben-Veniste also mined the transcripts for new traces of Haldeman's role in the cover-up. Previously undisclosed conversations in April 1973 between Haldeman and Nixon, Ben-Veniste charged, showed them building a "line" of defense against Dean, their intended scapegoat. The prosecution brought out some Nixon remarks of almost painful irony. "I always wondered about the taping equipment, but I'm damn glad we have it," Nixon told Haldeman. "It's helpful because while it has some things in there that . . . we prefer we wouldn't have said, but on the other hand, we also have some things in there that we know we've, that I've said that weren't that were pretty good,

payments of hush money to burglars—a charge that Haldeman angrily denied, noting that he had refused the funds.

Blood: The prosecution also drew blood with the testimony of Charles W. Colson, the former White House counsel who was indicted in the cover-up but copped another plea. Called by Ehrlichman's lawyer, William Frates, to try to vindicate his client on a single point, Colson obliged. But in a long, tough cross-examination by Mitchell's lawyer, William Hundley, Colson implicated Haldeman and Ehrlichman in the cover-up—and told a curious story about Mitchell. Shortly before the break-in, he recalled, he and Mitchell had speculated about a recent meeting between Hubert Humphrey and one of his campaign contributors in a New York hotel. Mitchell had looked up with a half smile, Colson recalled, and said, "Tell me what room they were in and I'll tell

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you everything they said in the room.”

The next day it happened again when Frates brought in William Bittman (Howard Hunt's ex-lawyer), who was of little help to Ehrlichman but who may have torpedoed Parkinson's chances for acquittal. In a stinging cross-examination, Jill Volner got Bittman to say that Parkinson had confirmed that “commitments” made to Hunt would be kept.

Ehrlichman himself would take the stand this week, but his defense was off to a shaky start—and during a recess, Haldeman's counsel, John J. Wilson, joshed Frates about his choice of witnesses. “Aren't we seekers of truth?” Frates joked. “Don't include me in that,” replied Wilson. “I'm trying a lawsuit.”

■ U.S. District Judge Gerhard Gesell ruled last week that the White House tapes introduced in evidence at the Watergate trial may be played publicly on radio and TV and released commercially. The actual release will be delayed until broadcasters file plans to reproduce and distribute the tapes—and until the Watergate jury reaches a verdict.