



NIX AD

The Minds Of the 'Managers'

By Richard J. Whalen

The writer, a former Nixon aide, is the author of "Catch a Falling Flag" and "The Founding Father."

DURING THE TRANSITION period in the winter of 1968-69, a then-assistant to President Johnson recalls giving John Ehrlichman a tour of the White House. In a basement office he pointed to the ceiling and said impishly: "The trap-door in front of the President's desk is overhead. The bodies fall down here and we carry them out the back way." Ehrlichman looked up, all seriousness. Finally the Johnson man signaled the visitor by laughing at his own joke.

Figuratively speaking, Ehrlichman, Bob Haldeman and several others have now slid through that trap-door and left the White House in disgrace, their fall from giddy heights of personal power uncushioned by President Nixon's heartfelt farewell.

Whether they have committed any crimes remains to be determined. Unquestionably, they have brought shame on the institution of the presidency and the man they served, perhaps to an irreparable degree. Of all the many questions still to be answered in the Watergate affair, perhaps the most troubling are: How did such men get where they were, and why did they stay so long? Some of the answers, it seems to me, ought to quiet the murmurs of self-congratulation passing through the ranks of the "free and vigorous press."

Haldeman, Ehrlichman & Company, who came to be known as "the Germans," rose on the side of politics furthest removed from the electorate: the behind-the-scenes realm of the managers, schedulers, advance-men, image manipulators, and assorted technicians who package and merchandise a presidential candidate. This was congenial work for Haldeman, the former manager of J. Walter Thompson's Los Angeles office, and he recruited cronies (such as Ehrlich-

BUT THE HOSTILE Haldeman and Mitchell factions joined forces to ruthlessly oppose the men inside and outside the Nixon organization, a miscellany of intellectuals and elected politicians, who supposed that "issues" mattered both in campaigning and governing. Shortly after Mr. Nixon's nomination in late August, 1968, when I resigned from his staff, a purge began that drove all "issue men" either out of his entourage completely or off to the lonely periphery. At the same time, party politicians, regardless of past loyalty and service to Mr. Nixon, were fenced off from him.

As a result, the men who did much to put Nixon in the White House had him almost completely to themselves after he arrived there, and they continued to give him the benefit of their experience and expertise. This was fine for them but very bad, on the evidence, for him and the presidency. For they regarded governing as little more than an extension of campaigning.

Campaign politics, regardless of party and candidate, is inherently conspiratorial. Because the only purpose and binding force of the enterprise is victory, almost any means toward that all-important end can be justified with a modest amount of rationalization. Everyone not a part of the conspiracy is, by definition, not to be trusted. Since that is where the public and the press stand, the attitude toward them follows automatically.

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man) and advertising agency underlings (such as Ron Ziegler and Dwight Chapin) into the Nixon *apparat*. He gave "the Boss" slavish loyalty and he demanded the same from those below.

The stage-managers, operating in a closed and secretive environment, had a natural antipathy to politicians, including those who were supposedly their collaborators. Through the closing months of the 1968 campaign and afterward in Washington, the Haldeman *apparat* waged jealous cold war against the politicians grouped around pipe-smoking John Mitchell, Mr. Nixon's former law partner and a relative newcomer to his inner circle.

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Long before the abortive burglary of the Democratic Party headquarters, the Watergate was a symbol. The chosen nesting-place of John and Martha and other well-heeled members of the Nixon hierarchy, it symbolized the transience and insularity of men who had taken power almost without bothering to unpack, men basically disinterested in the business of government whose hearts belonged in Westchester and points west, where big money and the good life waited.

To be sure, the right of a high official to eventually cash in on his experience and connections in Washington is established by long Democratic precedent. But Democrats who have come to office harboring the cynical ambition to exploit their public service have usually shown patience and a self-protecting prudence. They have known what to expect in Washington, and—far more important—what would be expected of them. They realized, as their unknowing Republican successors did not, that they would be *watched*.

Elected politicians, as a breed, are cautious men because their minds run naturally to the sometimes distant consequences of words and deeds. Intellectuals and "issues men" generally are advocates and want an audience. The former expect scrutiny and the latter crave it. But the *apparatchik*, lacking a constituency or an ideological commitment, does not understand scrutiny—he is the watcher and prier into secrets. And the conspiratorial campaign politician, who reduces all problems to power brokerage behind closed doors, is contemptuous of it. Sadly for Nixon, he had only these two kinds of men around him—the ignorant and the arrogant.

Haldeman and Ehrlichman and their buttoned-down, scurrying aides had the mission of protecting the President from disorder and enabling him to make the most effective use of his limited time and energy. Haldeman, as manager of Mr. Nixon's losing bid for the California governorship in 1962, had seen him come apart under pressure, and he was resolved to prevent

it from happening in the White House.

What this actually meant, Haldeman once described in an interview with a friendly reporter:

"We started out trying to keep political coloration as much as possible out of policy and hiring matters. However, we realize that these things make for variety in decision-making, and so within reasonable limits we have tried to keep a spread of opinion on the staff, so that no one is to the left of the President at his most liberal or to the right of the President at his most conservative. . . . Ehrlichman, Kissinger and I do our best to make sure that all points of view are placed before the President. We do act as a screen, because there is a real danger

of some advocate of an idea rushing in to the President . . . if that person is allowed to do so, and actually managing to convince [him] in a burst of emotion or argument . . ."

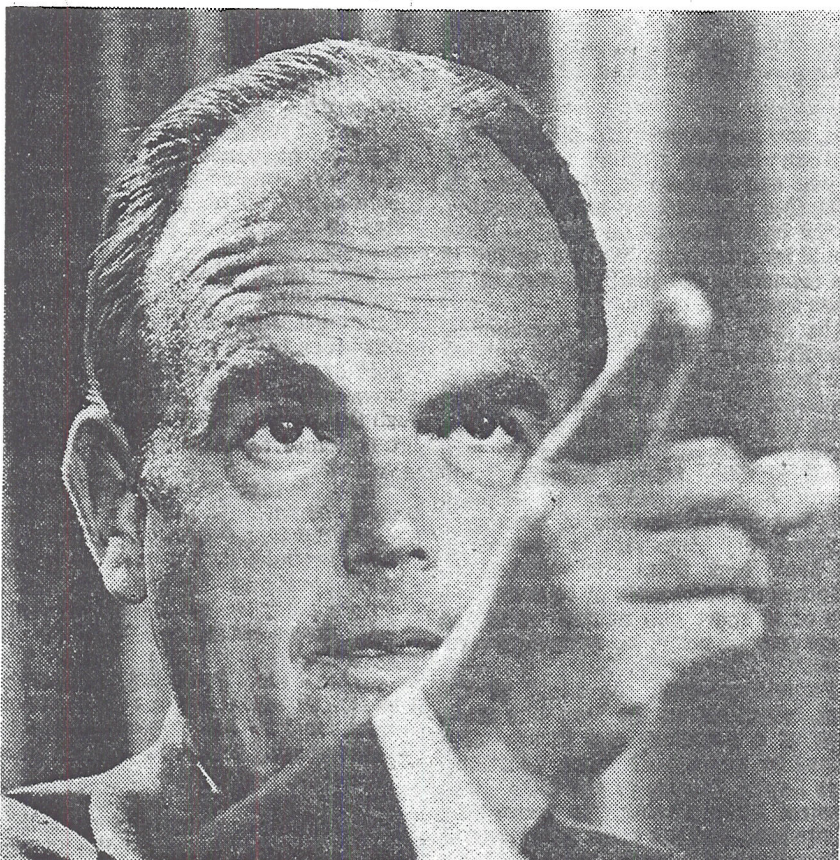
Can you imagine Marvin Watson saying something like that about Lyndon Johnson? Or Kenny O'Donnell presuming to enter John Kennedy's mind and judge the "reasonable limits" of what he wanted to hear? By Haldeman's own assertion, his dependency on the President, great as it was, was matched by President Nixon's dependence on him to protect him against his own inner weakness and irresolution.

Ehrlichman on Nixon

FROM ENTERING the President's mind, it was but a short step for his protectors to go even further and *speak* the President's mind. Quite early in the Nixon administration, a shaken Cabinet-level official and old friend of the President's described to me a White House meeting at which Ehrlichman had proposed a new domestic program. The official challenged him, saying that the proposal contradicted what he knew of Nixon's values and philosophy. Ehrlichman coldly informed the official that the President didn't have any philosophy—he did what was feasible and tactically rewarding.

"Ehrlichman didn't realize what he was saying," the official told me. "I know Nixon has values and a philosophy, but why doesn't Ehrlichman? And why does Nixon rely on a man like that?"

The President's dependence for political counsel on Mitchell—called in his heyday "El Supremo"—led him into a succession of avoidable confrontations and disasters. Republican leaders in the Congress, who were ordered to close ranks behind the likes of Supreme Court nominee G. Harrold Carswell, had no voice in the councils leading to such gross misjudgments. Yet the conservative barons of the Senate—Barry Goldwater, John Tower, Strom Thurmond—who had played a decisive role in Mr. Nix-



John Ehrlichman

United Press International

on's nomination and election kept their fury bottled up long after they saw both ideology and political common sense betrayed by Mitchell and his client in the White House.

Where, in all this, were the professional scrutinizers, the watchmen of the press? They were, for the most part, in a state of culture-shock brought about by the election of the first Republican administration they had encountered. And they were without a frame of reference to even begin describing the men who had taken over the White House. Because this was a Republican administration, the prevailing assumption was that it must be "conservative"—whatever that meant. On the eve of the first Hundred Days, a senior White House staff member boasted to a reporter about the administration's fundamental aimlessness: "There is no ideology, no central commitment, no fixed body of thought." He knew that he could dismiss idealism with impunity.

Influenced by the New Frontier to admire tough-minded, hard-boiled pragmatism, the White House press corps thought they saw it in Ehrlichman especially. They accepted the facade of neatness, discipline and managerial efficiency erected by "the Germans." Haldeman's crew cut and brisk manner were noted, but none of the watchers asked what kind of man this really was, and what, if anything, he believed in beyond serving "the Boss" and hermetically sealing him off from distractions. While the reporters panted after such colorful figures as Henry Kissinger and (while he lasted) Pat Moynihan, there was almost no critical scrutiny of the extraordinary White House organization structure and the unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of a few men unknown to the public.

A Press in the Dark

EARLY IN THE FALL of 1969, one of the surviving "issues men" confided his despair to me. "The Germans are ready to bring the whole thing under their control. Moynihan is out,

and so is Bryce Harlow. Ehrlichman will run a Domestic Affairs Council. Haldeman will be the only man between him and the President. You know what's so frustrating? The damned lazy press doesn't have a clue about what's happening. The only guy on the outside who understands the role of Haldeman and Ehrlichman is John Osborne of *The New Republic*."

So it was, but even the industrious Osborne had not found anyone inside to tell him the rest of what my former colleagues told me: "Haldeman and Ehrlichman shield the President by monopolizing him. One of them is present at every meeting—he sees no one alone. He's made himself their captive. Sometimes 'the Germans' don't

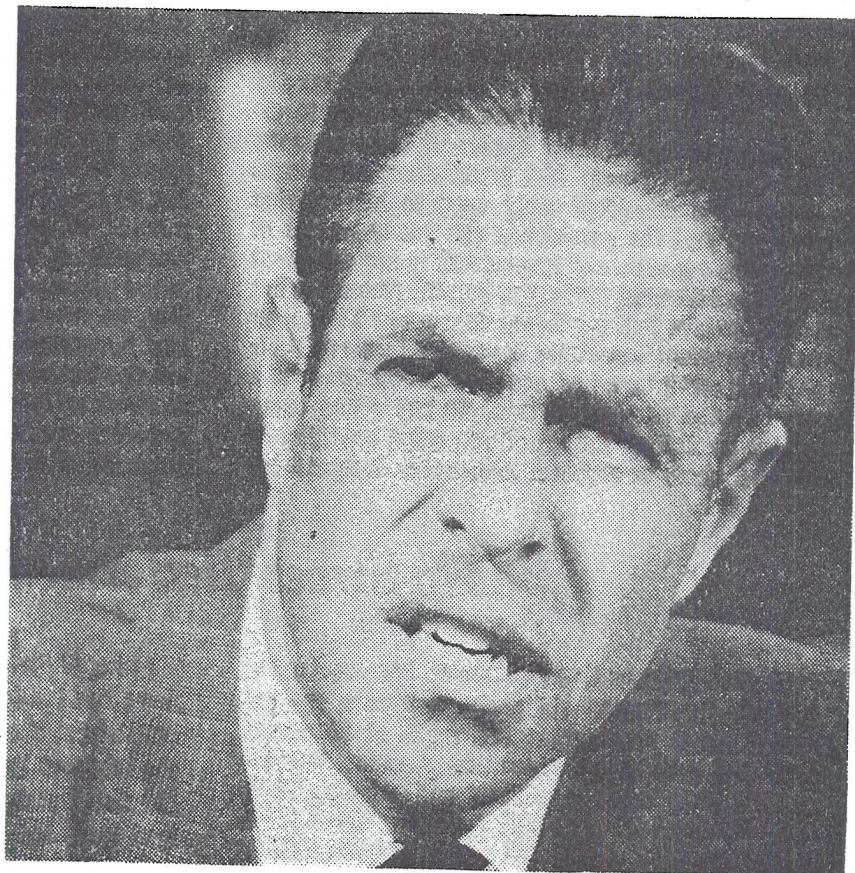
carry out Nixon's orders, or they let papers sit on their desks for a while, because they're certain he won't find out. How can he find out? All the channels flow back to Haldeman."

From another member of the White House staff, in those same early months of the administration, came this assessment and unwitting prophecy: "The Boss likes things simple and uncomplicated, and that's the way Haldeman and Ehrlichman serve them up. It will take a catastrophic error to change it."

Even if they could not get insiders to speak so candidly to them, reporters covering the White House had daily evidence that they were pressing their noses against a plastic P.R. shell. Behind it was nothing resembling a coherent conservatism—or anything else, for that matter. There were only mediocrities conniving to derive what satisfactions they could from incumbency before their mistakes overtook them. But the press was inert. The same reporters who swore during the 1968 campaign that they would get rid of press secretary Ron Ziegler "within three months" were still showing up years later to accept his handouts and double-talk.

The White House press failed to analyze what it saw and to make moral judgments on that performance. In a remarkably prescient speech in 1962, the late Lawrence Fanning of the *Field* newspapers of Chicago worried about the elitism of the Kennedy administration and the lack of reaction by the docile press: "It boils down to government by an intellectual elite, and the policies can only be as good as the members of the elite. What happens if the elite is replaced by a venal, arrogant, or power-mad cabal? What happens if it is replaced by an elite of the stupid?"

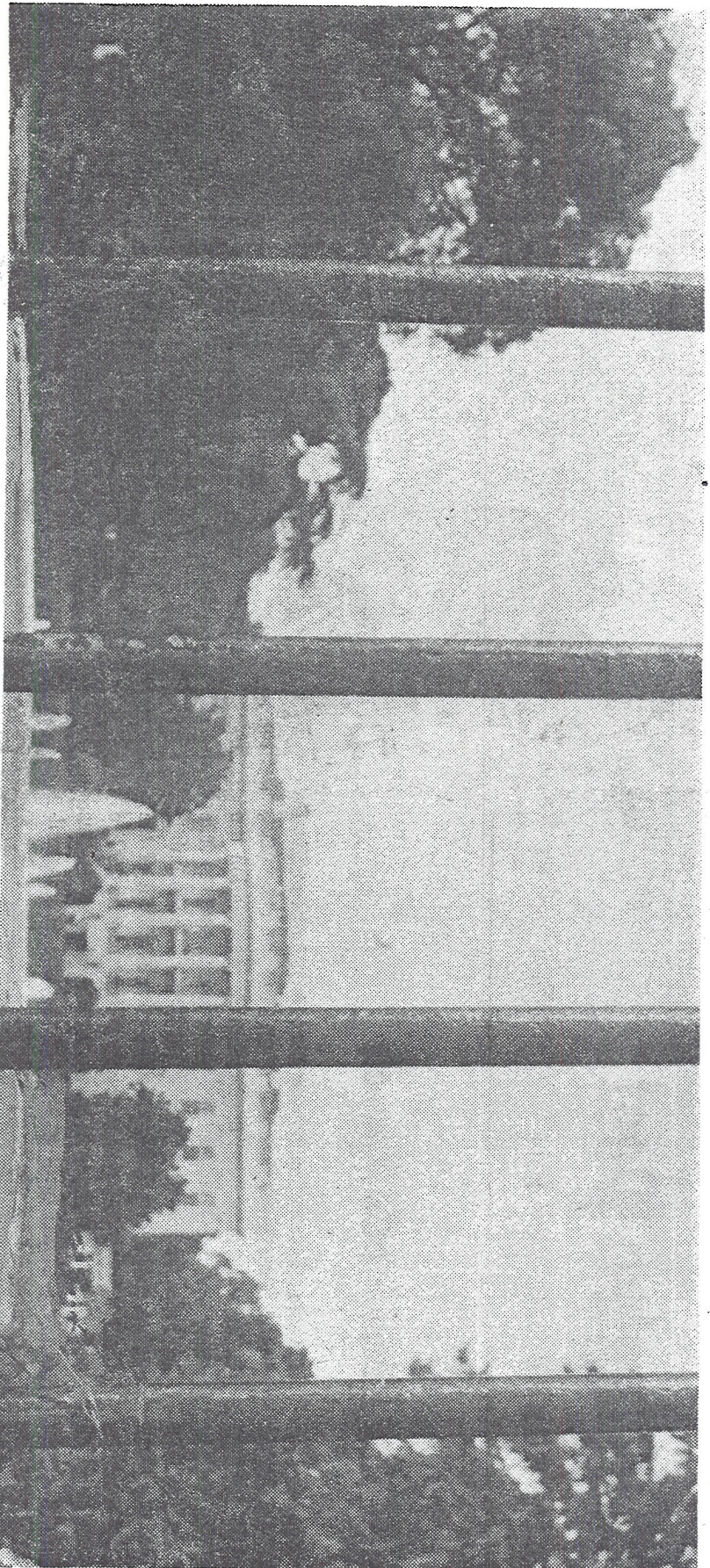
What has happened is the Watergate. After all the bodies have vanished through the trap-door and been piled up behind the White House, it will remain for the Washington press to ask itself why a police-beat story was needed to break the truth about what had been going on in the White House for four years.



H. R. Haldeman

By Wally McNamee—Newsweek

THE WASHINGTON



By Harry Nalchayan—The Washington Post