

Book Says Nixon Averted War Twice

Washington

H. R. Haldeman, whose published version of major events during the Nixon White House years has set off nationwide reaction, credits Richard Nixon with acts of statesmanship that twice saved the world from nuclear confrontations.

One of them, he contends, "was the most dangerous of all the confrontations this nation has ever faced."

That incident, according to Nixon's top White House aide, came in 1969, when Russia moved nuclear-armed divisions within two miles

of the Chinese border and threatened to strike China's infant atomic plants. Haldeman says the buildup of hundreds of nuclear weapons poised for attack followed "several" Soviet overtures for the United States to join in a surprise "surgical" strike against China.

But, he writes, a last-minute strategem devised by Nixon and his foreign affairs adviser, Henry Kissinger, caused the Russians to pull back their warheads. What the Americans did was suggest to the Russians that the United States might try to discuss the tense

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WHAT HALDEMAN BOOK SAYS

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situation directly with China.

Russia, fearful that the United States and China might be joining against it, then drew back its forces.

Haldeman wrote that Major General George Keegan, then head of Air Force intelligence and now retired, used an additional strategy in this crisis that had worked in the original Cuban missile confrontation: inform the Russians that they had too much to lose to make a nuclear war thinkable.

In 1962, according to Haldeman, Keegan had sent a message — deliberately uncodified so the Russians could intercept it — to the U.S. Defense secretary informing him that the United States “has 1300 nuclear weapons airborne and named Soviet cities which were targeted for the bombs.”

In 1969, Haldeman wrote, Keegan sent a similar message for Soviet ears stating that a nuclear attack on China would kill thousands of Siberians with fallout.

Keegan said last night that the Haldeman account was basically correct but added that the 1969 warning was information passed to the Soviets orally rather than by way of a military communication designed to be intercepted.

The second nuclear incident he describes occurred in 1970, when the Russians allegedly provoked a type of Cuban missile crisis.

The discovery by aerial reconnaissance of soccer fields in Cuba tipped off the Americans that the Russians were secretly building a submarine base at Cienfuegos, a Cuban seaport, in violation of the understandings reached with Moscow in 1962 after the Cuban missile crisis. “Those soccer fields could mean war,” Haldeman quotes Kissinger as having said. “Cubans play baseball, Russians play soccer.”

After many hours of discussion, the Nixon administration decided to use quiet diplomacy to defuse the potentially dangerous situation, Haldeman said.

The Russians were told that the nuclear submarine base would spark an updated missile crisis.

A week passed and the Russians did nothing, so Kissinger made a veiled announcement that the administration would regard construction as a “hostile act.”

According to Haldeman, the quiet pressure worked and con-

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struction on the base was stopped.

The accounts in Haldeman's “The Ends of Power,” made public in advance of serialization and book publication, drew instant rejoinders — and rebuttals.

Leading the list was a terse, one-sentence statement issued by Nixon's office in San Clemente:

“Former President Nixon's memoirs will be published in May.”

That was all Nixon had to say about charges by his White House chief of staff that the former President had caused the burglars to break into the Watergate, and later had tried to erase incriminating tape recordings.

Other major figures from the Nixon administration denied most of Haldeman's more sensational assertions.

Appearing on NBC's “Today” show, former Secretary of State Kissinger was asked about Haldeman's report that Russia had asked the United States to join in a preemptive nuclear attack on China.

“That is not true,” Kissinger replied. “All the papers on foreign policy matters run across my desk and I do not recall any such event and I would not have forgotten it.”

Kissinger was less certain about Haldeman's statement that the Russians had massed hundreds of nuclear weapons on the Chinese border.

Most of the reaction to Haldeman's book dealt, as does his manuscript, with Watergate.

One new element emerged among the welter of stories yesterday — Haldeman's brief remarks about what might have been on the celebrated 18½-minute “gap” on a crucial Nixon tape.

Haldeman had testified at the Watergate coverup trial that he could not remember what had been said on that missing conversation just three days after the Watergate break-in. As Newsweek magazine notes, in its account of the Haldeman book, “He might thus be liable to a new perjury charge if his

memory suddenly unclouded in his book.”

In his book Haldeman reconstructs what he and Nixon “might have” said that day. This “guess” puts more of the blame for Watergate on Nixon and his White House aide Charles Colson.

Haldeman gives a “theory” that Nixon might have said: “I can't stand an FBI interrogation of Colson . . . Colson can talk about the President if he cracks.”

Yesterday, Colson denied Haldeman's suggestion that Nixon had instructed him to “get the goods” on Democratic chairman Lawrence O'Brien, thus causing the Watergate break-in.

“False,” he said. “It just didn't happen that way.”

He and Nixon had discussed O'Brien often, he said, and attempts were made to investigate O'Brien's fund-raising techniques. But that occurred months before the June 17, 1972, break-in, he insisted.

In a separate telephone interview with the Post, Colson confirmed one incident Haldeman reported — that Haldeman “had dressed down” Colson so severely as to leave him sobbing.

But he said the circumstances of that meeting were totally different from what Haldeman described. What triggered the incident, he said, was an emotional clash between him and Haldeman after he had learned that Haldeman had secretly tape-recorded a dinner meeting of high government officials.

The taping, according to Colson, took place in Blair House in 1971 shortly after then-treasury Secretary John B. Connally had switched parties and joined the Nixon administration. Connally spoke there that night. Colson said Haldeman never said why he taped the meeting.

“I told him I was tired of his tactics,” Colson said. “I told him I was leaving the White House.”

But later, Colson went on, he and Haldeman became reconciled. He added, however, that that incident “should have tipped me off” to Haldeman's method of operating.

“If I had left, I might not have gone to prison,” he added.

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