

Betty Beale: Washington

The Sale of Haldeman's Briefcase

WASHINGTON — Bob Haldeman, the powerful boss of the White House and human door to President Nixon, resigned April 30, and his briefcase will be auctioned off May 19 at the National Cathedral School for Girls.

The briefcase was donated to the school for its fund-raising festival by Jo Haldeman when she had no idea that her husband would have to resign because of alleged connections with the Watergate. Whether he had actually ever used it or not, the briefcase was a fascinating acquisition and potentially a big money maker because of its markings.

When Mrs. Haldeman presented it to the women running the festival it not only bore the initials "HRH" in gold on the leather, but the inside sections were labeled with classifications guaranteed to stimulate the imagination.

Jo was eager to help the school because daughter, Ann, is a student there.

Then came the bombshell — the banishment of the stern dictator of the door. Neither of the Haldemans asked to have the briefcase returned or changed in any way. But Mrs. Harry Stringer decided that it would be less embarrassing to young Ann if proofs of the Haldeman ownership were removed. So she scratched the gold initials off and extracted such labels as "Current," "File," "Hot" and "Destroy."

"You might have raised hundreds of dollars on that item at the auction if you had left it intact," she was told. ... "Well, you can still see the outline of the initials," she said, insisting she was right in trying to protect Ann.

But 13-year-old Ann can't pick up a Washington paper without reading about her dad and TV cameras follow him everywhere — even to and from church last Sunday.

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A carefully kept French-American secret has inadvertently come to light. France is presenting to the American nation as its gift to the Bicentennial Celebration a sound and light show at Mount Vernon. And it is rumored that the President of France will come here to officially open it.

People who have seen the "Son et Lumiere" at Versailles and at the Pyramids in Egypt know what an exciting new dimension this will add to the home of our first President.

And how fitting that the French should be the donors of such a gift! They were indelibly linked with our revolution of independence through financial and troop support.

The French connections with Mount Vernon are numerous. Lafayette was a house guest there several times during the revolution and afterwards, too. The key to the Bastille hangs in a gilded case in the central hall of Mount Vernon where George Washington placed it. Lafayette called it "the key to the main portal of the

fortress of despotism" in his letter of presentation after the fall of the Bastille. He wanted "the patriarch of liberty" to have it.

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WHITE HOUSE NOTES: More than a few guests at the White House dinner for Willy Brandt noticed a change in the President's appearance. The Watergate case seems to have taken its toll, physically. Instead of bristling with his usual confidence and vigor, his expression seemed less sure, and weary under his party facade. It was the first time anyone noticed a definite stoop about his shoulders that added to his years.

As for Pat Nixon, one dinner guest said, "Usually she puts forth tremendously. But tonight I think she was just going through the motions."

Robert Moses, the former New York park commissioner, was at his first White House party and having such a good time he ate everything in sight, one at his table observed, "even the geranium finger bowl."

He asked his dinner partner, "How do you like it?" She allowed as how she was just going through the motions. "I'm sure you'll find it quite polite." There were other things in the etiquette book.

Pauline Kennedy, who is in her own age group, hardly the right age for the chancellor of a country dotted with geranium houses.

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AROUND THE TOWN: Clare Luce quipped, "My definition of an honest politician is a politician who honestly doesn't know what his campaign director did to get him elected."

Hubert Humphrey at the German reception for Willy Brandt, which also drew Teddy Kennedy and Ethel Kennedy, said apropos of Watergate, "The country has suffered long enough." Did that mean he was throwing his hat into the ring for the '76 nomination? He burst into laughter.

Anita Cadieux, wife of the ambassador of Canada, told Federal Reserve Chairman Arthur Burns that Watergate has produced respect for America among members of the diplomatic corps. Why? Because worse things go on in other countries but with our checks and balances and free press, the diplomats "are seeing democracy at work."

"Does Martha Mitchell know anything about the Watergate?" I asked a former associate of John Mitchell. "About 18 percent," was his guess. "You mean he would confide in her about such things as espionage?"

"No, but late in the evening if there were telephone calls to his apartment she couldn't help but hear something."