

The Closeness of Nixon

Washington

The day the Watergate scandal made it necessary for H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman to leave the White House, a grim President Nixon called them "two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know."

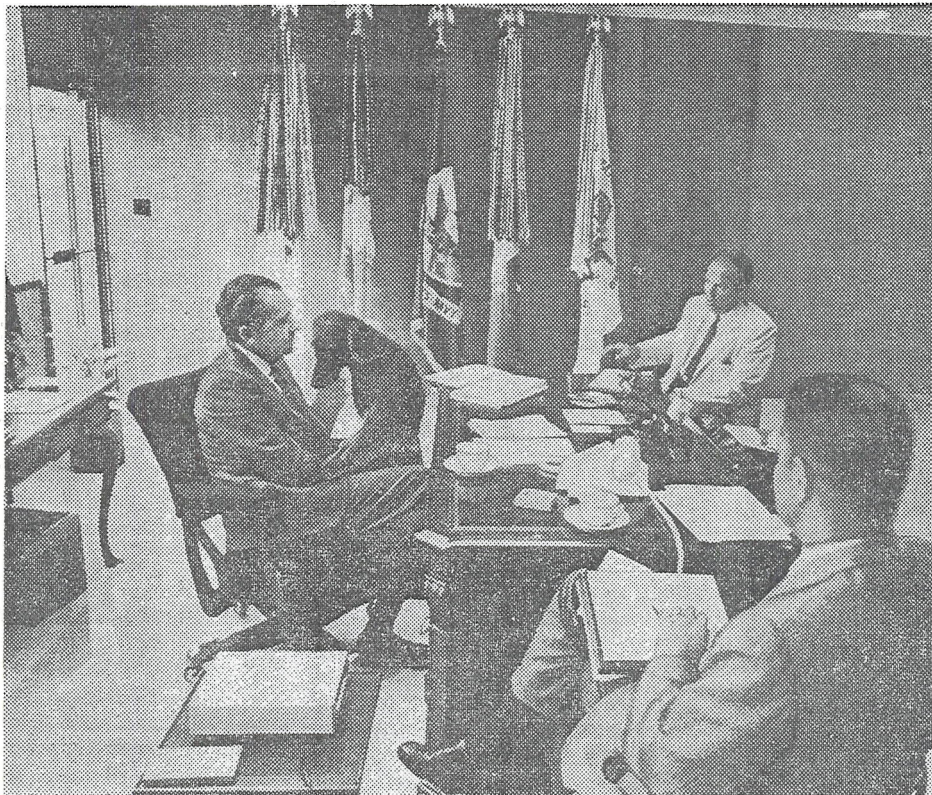
For all that has happened since then, their indictments included, Mr. Nixon has never publicly wavered in that assessment, and from all indications their relationship has persevered in private.

The edited transcripts of White House tape recordings show for the first time how close Haldeman and Ehrlichman really were to the President, how much they were a part of the Nixon presidency,

Even when the Justice Department was on the verge of breaking the coverup in which they allegedly took part, Mr. Nixon continued to tell them what he knew of the investigation. Throughout, his handling of the matter seemed designed to protect them as much as to protect himself and they, as much as he, were authors of the strategy.

The edited transcripts show that in the privacy of the Oval Office, they influenced his decisions, backstopped his judgments and anticipated his thoughts. More than just top-ranking staff men, they were extensions of Mr. Nixon himself, dealing with him almost as equals, party to private thoughts revealed to no one else in the administration.

With John W. Dean III already cooperating with prosecutors in breaking the cov-



Edited transcripts revealed how Mr. Nixon, John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman (foreground) discussed their problems almost as equals

erup, the President told Haldeman and Ehrlichman April 17, 1973:

"I know that as far as you're concerned, you'll go out and throw yourselves on a damned sword. I'm aware of that. I'm trying to think the thing through with that in mind because, damn it, you're the two most valuable members on this staff. I know that."

"The problem is, you're the two most loyal and two most honest. We don't have to go into that. You know how I feel about that. It's not bull — it's the truth. The problem we got here is this. I do not want to be in a position where the damned

public clamor makes . . . it necessary . . . to have Bob come in one day and say, 'Well, Mr. President, the public blah, blah, blah, I'm going to leave!'"

The discussions revealed by the edited Watergate transcripts give the impression that the 37th President of the U.S., at least through this period of trouble, was a composite of Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

Haldeman, the chief of staff, would sometimes break into a Presidential sentence and complete it when Mr. Nixon appeared to be searching for a word.

Ehrlichman, the most expansive of the three, would often put himself in Mr. Nixon's shoes when spelling out a problem, talking as though he were the President.

For example, during the April 17 conversation, the president posed a question as to what he would do if Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen, who was then heading the investigation, came in with evidence on Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

"Suppose that the assistant attorney general comes in," the President said, "Magruder and Dean have made charges. His argument is, 'You have an option, sir, and you as President should act. And I'm telling you now those charges are in the posses-

sion of the government.'"

Their answers were ready. Haldeman — "O.K. You say, 'Mr. Assistant Attorney General, I want to explain my policy to you so you'll know what our relationship is. Our policy is that I will immediately suspend — on leave — anybody against whom formal charges are filed by an indictable information.'"

Nixon — "By information, you mean — ."

Ehrlichman — "In other words, formal charges are filed." Then, putting himself in the President's shoes, Ehrlichman continued, "As soon as that happens, those men will go on leave. This is a town that is so full of wild charges that if I operated on any other basis, even of those who were brought to me by 20 bishops and an attorney general, I couldn't be suspending people around here or the place would look like a piece of Swiss cheese. But let me suggest you do this. You go ahead and diligently pursue the Haldeman and Ehrlichman case because I need to know."

Nixon — "Right."

On another occasion, Mr. Nixon wondered what should be done if Egil (Bud) Krogh, former head of the White House "plumbers" group was questioned about the Ellsberg burglary.

"I don't think Hunt will strike him," Ehrlichman

and Two Key Aides

said, referring to E. Howard Hunt, a member of the plumbers involved in the burglary against Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. "If he did, I would put the 'national security' tent over this whole operation."

"I sure would," the President replied.

"And say," Ehrlichman continued, "there are a lot of things that went on in the national interest where they involved tapes, they involved entry, they involved interrogation, they involved a lot of things that I don't propose to open up (unintelligible) . . . just headline it."

Most of the time, both Haldeman and Ehrlichman seemed to sense ahead of time what Mr. Nixon would conclude, but Haldeman particularly seemed willing at times to disagree.

After former White House and campaign aide Jeb Stuart Magruder began talking about Watergate, Mr. Nixon raised the possibility of asking U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica to appoint a special prosecutor, saying "I think the damn thing is going to come out anyway, and I think you better cut the losses now and just better get it over much sooner and, frankly, cheaper."

"How come all the rush now?" Haldeman asked. "You're not committed to this route. You are not necessarily forced to come out now. Magruder can stay with his own position if he wants to."

Throughout their careers at the White House, Haldeman and Ehrlichman were criticized by members of Congress for isolating the President in the Oval Office, but it was always widely assumed that when the aides spoke, they spoke directly for Mr. Nixon.

As prosecutors, with the help of Dean and Magruder, developed links that made Haldeman and Ehrlichman an unbearable liability for the President, the three seemed drawn even closer.

On April 14, there were long late evening telephone calls from the President to each of them. They were at times bitter, at times combative, still hoping for a way

to stay in the White House.

"Well, John, you've had a hell of a week—two weeks," the President told Ehrlichman. "And of course poor Bob is going through the tortures of the damned."

People were beginning to advise that everybody accused in the scandal be fired, the President said.

"I mean you can't do that," Mr. Nixon said. "Or am I wrong?"

"No you are right," said Ehrlichman.

Even though it was more than two weeks before the President was to finally accept their resignations, Ehrlichman seemed to have concluded that their chances

of regaining their stature in the White House were gone.

Mr. Nixon suggested, "One way out is to say: Well look, as long as these guys have been charged, out they go and they can fight this battle and they can return when they get cleared. It is not good, is it?"

"You know I don't think it is," Ehrlichman answered. "I don't think that is any way to run a railroad."

"Well, the point is," the President said a few moments later, "whatever we say about Harry Truman, etc., while it hurt him, a lot of people admired the old bastard for standing by people who were guilty as hell and, damn it, I am that kind

of person. I am not one who is going to say, look, while this guy is under attack, I drop him. Is there something to be said for that or not?"

"I don't think you would gain anything by it," Ehrlichman said. "The problem doesn't go away."

Two days later, Haldeman saw the end, too. He told Ehrlichman and the President, "If we have to get out of here . . . I hope to get funding for the ability to clear my name and spend the rest of my life destroying what some people like Dean and Magruder have done to the President."

Los Angeles Times