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Haldeman: I blew it

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Watergate tapes should have been destroyed once it appeared that Richard Nixon could not keep them private, says former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman. But now he believes the rest of the White House tapes should be made public.

In a paid-for interview to be telecast by CBS today, Haldeman said that while the Watergate scandal was unfolding he recommended keeping the tapes because he thought they would aid Nixon in knowing what had been said in the Oval office.

"I never, stupidly, didn't really think the thing through to the point of realizing . . . the enormous damage that would be done to me and to Richard Nixon," he said.

"I should have realized that as a practical matter, that the release of the tapes was not good. And when it got to the point of having to release them, or of having even to consider the possibility of releasing them . . . they should have been destroyed."

The recordings eventually were instrumental in unseating Nixon and in Haldeman's conviction on cover-up charges.

"Morally, I would say that given what we now know, and what's happened, it was a disastrous thing to have done," Haldeman said of the taping system. But he insisted the system was Nixon's idea. This conflicts with a statement attributed to Mrs. Nixon, who is said to have blamed Haldeman.



—AP Photo

PENSIVE MOMENT DURING INTERVIEW TAPING
H. R. Haldeman (left) and newsman Mike Wallace

"He wanted them for the purpose of recording and preserving for his use, his personal use, all of what was said by him and by others," Haldeman told interviewer Mike Wallace.

"That is absolutely the only reason?"

"Did he ever say, 'Bob, get rid of them?'" Wallace asked.

"No, he didn't."

Haldeman said, "I was not told either to stop the taping or to destroy the tapes at any time. Had I been told to do so and had failed to do so, that failure could easily have been remedied."

Haldeman was interviewed at his home in the

fashionable Hancock Park section of Los Angeles. It took more than 6½ hours and was cut to one-hour showings for Sunday and on March 30.

CBS admits it paid for the interview but won't say how much. Estimates range from \$25,000 to \$50,000, and has been criticized as "checkbook journalism." A CBS spokesman defended

the payment, saying Haldeman spent about 50 hours with network people — "just as much time as if he were writing an article for a magazine."

Haldeman, like his three convicted co-defendants in the Watergate cover-up trial, is free while appealing their conspiracy-perjury conviction. He is under a 2½ to 8 year sentence.