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The 'Ghost'

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It was just a few years later — May, 1977. David Frost time. America watched, enthralled, as Richard Nixon, a former President of the United States, informed his British host that he had, indeed, made a mistake as chief executive: He had held on to his old employees, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, too long. Richard Nixon attributed this example of extreme tardiness to his own helpful and compassionate nature: "... I wasn't a good butcher."

As it happened, one member of the enthralled viewing audience was a certain H. R. Haldeman. He listened carefully as his old boss described the tearful firing of John Ehrlichman:

"I said, 'You know, John, when I went to bed last night . . . I hoped, I almost prayed I wouldn't wake up this morning . . .'"

Well, H. R. Haldeman, as he listened to those words, might have been a bit more touched by that particular reminiscence if it weren't for one thing: It so happened that those were the precise words Nixon had used with Haldeman when he showed him the door. In fact, Haldeman — even though he disagreed with the firing itself — had always regarded those sorrowful words that accompanied the bad news as an especially moving memory he would always cherish.

That, at least, is what Haldeman's ghostwriter says. And the ghostwriter happened to be with Haldeman a few days later when John Ehrlichman called Haldeman's Los Angeles home collect from prison. As old co-workers will, the two men discussed their former boss. Nixon had irritated Haldeman even more by referring to him as "a splendid man."

"He must think we're dense," Haldeman told Ehrlichman. And then he went on to ask his painful question: Did they both get the same good-by from the President?

Yes, said Ehrlichman; yes, the words were the same.

And thus was a new Watergate book born: "The Ends of Power."

Haldeman's ghostwriter, Joe DiMona, has this to say:

"Haldeman felt that he alone had a very, very special relationship with Nixon. He felt he was different from Ehrlichman, different from Kissinger and the rest.

"So when Nixon made that poetic speech about praying — that was a very emotional thing for

Haldeman. I believe that bothered him more than even the 'butcher' statement."

It bothered him so much, in fact, that H. R. Haldeman, who had previously wanted to write a totally favorable, pro-Nixon book, suddenly changed his mind.

It bothered Haldeman so terribly that he decided to tell the world just who erased those 18½ minutes of tape; who he thinks Deep Throat is (former deputy counsel Fred Fielding); how he feels about wiretapping (he sees nothing wrong with it if national security is involved); and how he feels about his own participation in Watergate (he's sorry about some things; but, as DiMona says, contrition isn't exactly his favorite subject).

And finally, Nixon's words to David Frost and America bothered Haldeman so dreadfully that he wrote a 40-page letter of disagreement to his old boss, listing his

Behind

Haldeman

objections to various aspects of the show.

"Don't send it," advised DiMona. "Save that emotion for the book."

And, gradually, Haldeman even revised his attitude toward DiMona, who, as an East Coast writer, represented so much of what Haldeman had always disliked.

DiMona is a very genial man of uncertain age ("Around 50," is all he'll say, and he smiles sheepishly as he says it); and he has a varied background. He's a lawyer who doesn't practice. He once wrote scripts for public relations movies; he wrote a book on court-martial; and he has a great deal of political savvy that he inserts in the novels he writes. Which is why Times Books chose him to work with Haldeman, and also — ultimately — why Haldeman came to like and trust him.

To be sure, it took eight months for Bob Haldeman to let down his ever-lengthening hair. It took the publication of DiMona's "The Benedict Arnold Connection," a novel about nuclear terrorism.

But once Haldeman had read that novel, which he found politically valid, he opened up more than ever. And DiMona, who had at first been in the unhappy position of playing ghost to a defensive and reserved raconteur, changed his attitude toward Haldeman. Maybe you will be surprised at how DiMona (who covered the trial of John Mitchell and Maurice Stans for New York magazine) feels toward the Watergate criminal:

"Knowing his integrity as I do," DiMona says, "and no one knows a man's integrity more than his ghost, he would always insist on putting in material, even when it didn't make him look good . . . I'd trust him with every cent I have . . ."

In fact, Haldeman's entire demeanor can perhaps be divided into two categories: Pre-Frost and Post-Frost.

Pre-Frost, Haldeman was a mite frosty toward DiMona.

"I know you salivate whenever anything anti-Nixon, is said," Haldeman told his ghost one chilly night in January.

"He hated to be a part of the anti-Nixon press hysteria," explains DiMona. "He hated to give them any more ammunition.

"And then —" DiMona beams widely — "And then — enter David Frost. This is beautiful . . ."

Suddenly, DiMona beheld a beautiful talking Haldeman. Together they beheld their 50-50 share in a \$140,000 book contract, which ballooned into an estimated \$500,000 apiece — maybe more. West Germany alone paid \$250,000 for newspaper syndication rights.

Even Nixon beheld the possibilities of such a memoir and phoned Haldeman to discuss their beautiful books. Yes, Nixon (like fellow Nixon alumni Charles Colson, Dwight Chapin and Ehrlichman) still calls Bob Haldeman, who is now in Lumpoc prison and assigned as a meter inspector at a sewage plant. But Haldeman reports that his conversations with his old boss are rather stilted.

Post-Frost, DiMona found that Haldeman was still the boss, still very much in charge. "You don't write anything FOR Haldeman," he says, grinning. "He changed my book right down to the end. He rewrote, revised, edited for five drafts. He's very meticulous."

DiMona understood the ambivalence the man must have felt about his old boss.

"I played the anti-Nixon role," DiMona says, "thereby trying to get him out of his defensive posture . . . I appreciated that he was going through a very, very tortuous situation. You see — some people, like John Dean, can adapt. But Haldeman is a very, very straight person and ultra-ultra loyal. Now he was in a position to see that Nixon was going to rewrite history to suit himself.

"So Haldeman was in favor of telling everything he knew, good and bad, about Nixon. Nevertheless, I could tell this was a very emotional time for him."

DiMona is very insistent about this. The Haldeman perceived by the public in the Watergate days is not the Haldeman perceived by his ghost. "That's what I'm trying to get across to you. That Haldeman is not a robot type.

"He had to be the Dr. No of the administration. He always had to be the bearer of bad news.

"He is a reserved man and he's serious, but the chilliness he has to this day comes as a result of his experience with Nixon where he was under intense stress.

Toward the end of his freedom, it was still all stiff-upper-lip and little outward display of emotion for Haldeman.

"I never saw Haldeman cry," DiMona shakes his head wonderingly. "And I was with him right up until the end, too. Until the day he went off to prison. He never looked sad. Never gave any indication of bitterness."

"How do you feel?" asked DiMona.

And Haldeman replied, "I don't react to injustice."