In an exclusive interview, Jo Haldeman, the wife of Richard Nixon's top aide, H.R. Haldeman, talks for the first time about the White House years. How did her marriage change after Watergate—and who are the people she can, and cannot, forgive?...

By Thomas Thompson

Joanne "Jo" Haldeman's husband, H.R. Haldeman, was the second most powerful man in America when he served as President Nixon's chief of staff. Now Bob Haldeman works in a sewage plant at Lompoc Federal Prison north of Santa Barbara, Calif.—a casualty of the Watergate scandal that ultimately forced Nixon to resign. To this day Jo Haldeman says she does not know exactly what caused Watergate, nor what the final implications of it will be. She leaves it to a future historian to determine who did what to whom.

Jo Haldeman refuses to say much of anything about the charges that her husband was part of a conspiracy. "I have the natural bias of a wife," she says. "I am prejudiced toward my husband because I believe in him. I think it inappropriate for me to comment further at this point in time." (Yes, she really does use that phrase—and often.)

For the moment, Jo can deal with waiting for her husband's release—Judge John Sirica, in his last act before retiring, cut Bob Haldeman's sentence to one to four years, making him eligible for parole in June.

Fate deals strange cards to people. By all rights—bloodlines, family tradition of service, social credentials—Jo Haldeman should be in her civic prime as she approaches 50. She is the kind of woman—tanned, tailored, thin—who does volunteer work through the Junior League.

Toward the end, when the Nixon presidency was toppling, she kept thinking: "This can't be happening to us. We respect tradition and we honor our system of justice." Perhaps these beliefs contributed to the one substantial disagreement that Jo and Bob had in the final hours of the scandal. Bob told his wife that he was going to ask President Nixon for a pardon—for himself, for all the Watergate figures, and for the Vietnam dissenters—to take every albatross off of Gerald Ford's neck. Jo remembers the moment well:

"Bob was and is a pragmatist. Naturally, he didn't want to go to prison. I didn't want him to go to prison, either, but I was not in favor of even asking President Nixon for a pardon. I felt we had to stand on our own record and let the people judge. And to me, it would have been very uncomfortable to live with a pardon." Recently, a friend suggested to Jo that she beseech Jimmy Carter for a pardon for her husband, or at least ask for executive clemency. She refused. "It would be putting another burden on this President's shoulders. Why should he go out on a 'political limb' for the Watergate defendants? During Bob's absence, each day will seem like forever to me. But at least the end is in sight. I can wait."

That is Jo Haldeman's old-fashioned, almost severely moralistic point of view. "I have tremendous faith and respect and love for my husband," she says. "He is a good and decent man. I think our lives will speak for themselves. They didn't begin with Nixon and they won't end with Nixon. But if people want to judge us and remember us by Watergate, then so be it. I can live with that, too."

Joanne Hortob was a third-generation Californian and a popular member of the exclusive Marlborough School in Los Angeles when, at age 15, she met her husband-to-be. He was two years older, serious and a little stuffy. Her father was a prominent lawyer; his, the owner of a prosperous air-conditioning and heating business. Their families had the same friends, the same clubs, the same religion (Christian Science). When Jo and Bob were both at UCLA, they fell in love, and Bob's Beta pin found a place next to Jo's Kappa key.

When Bob pressed her to marry him before her graduation, she agreed. "I was not career-minded," she recalls. "I was expected to get married, raise children, keep a nice home and work in the community. I did exactly that. It seems so archaic now, particularly compared to what our children believe. For example: our oldest daughter told us that she intends to keep the Haldeman name when she gets married."

With his customary discipline—the rigid posture that would one day have the Washington press referring to him as a Teutonic commander—Bob Haldeman made a thorough survey of the business scene after his marriage and graduation. He wanted a career in...
HALDEMAN

advertising and he finally determined that the top of the line was J. Walter Thompson, Inc., in New York. He applied for work at the agency, was hired and settled into the executive position that would be his professional home for the next 22 years.

The Haldeman family grew in orderly fashion to include two sons and two daughters. Their home base was Los Angeles—specifically, the very proper section of Hancock Park. During the years in California, Bob Haldeman became interested in, and then committed to, the career of Richard Nixon. In 1962, Bob became the campaign chairman for Nixon’s California gubernatorial campaign, and in the 1966 election, he worked as Nixon’s chief of staff.

On Election Day, 1968, Jo and Bob voted early in Los Angeles, then flew with Pat and Dick Nixon to New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, where they watched Republicans gain control of the White House. It had been under Democratic control since 1960, when John Kennedy shattered the executive position that would be his professional home.

Jeanne Ehrlichman, wife of Nixon aide John Ehrlichman, took a long walk on the beach at Key Biscayne. Both now knew that they would have to live in Washington. "Bob had high hopes about what could be accomplished. He really felt Nixon would be a great president. As controversial as his personality was, he had the makings, the potential for greatness."

But Jeanne Ehrlichman was more hesitant about moving to Washington. John had worked very hard getting his law practice started in Seattle. Jo sensed that Jeanne would have preferred to stay there.

"The Haldemans took a furnished apartment at first—in of course—the Watergate complex, and later moved into a colonial house in Chevy Chase. The Nixon era began.

Jo Haldeman learned quickly that for the wife of a man who was chief of staff, political life requires a kind of total surrender. She gave her husband to the President. A White House car picked up Haldeman each morning shortly after 4 A.M., and deposited him home again 12 hours later. There was usually an attempt at a family dinner—Jo insisted on this—but only Sunday nights were-dependably private. On these special evenings, Bob cooked a California barbecue and the family dined al fresco—sometimes on the front porch in grizzling grayness.

"I don't feel that the President gave her much support,” Jo says. “He was so involved in affairs of state.” Jo remembers one moment of genuine warmth and tenderness between the Nixons. That was at their daughter Tricia’s wedding, which was “perfect in every way.”

Jeanne Ehrlichman, in particular, fretted about Pat Nixon’s apparent loneliness. Pat seemed to have few friends, other than those in California who were rarely present. Jeanne decided Pat needed more in her life,” rec- calls Jo. “I always assumed that Mrs. Nixon was doing what she wanted to do. But Jeanne, who is very gregarious and enthusiastic, kept saying, 'What can we do for Pat?' Jeanne came up with the idea of asking her to join some of the wives on an outing to a country fair, 'just to get her out of the White House, and do something unofﬁcial and casual.' The idea never worked out, though.

The same fate befell one of Jo’s ideas, which at the time seemed to have exceptional promise. Jo looked around her and decided there were a dozen or so attractive and bright young women whose husbands worked for Nixon. Why couldn’t these women be used as guides for certain functions at the White House? They could learn the history of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. and dispense it to, say, special visitors from the U.S. or from abroad. "It never got off the ground,” says Jo. Perhaps the administration, being so 'image conscious,' was afraid to use us. And it was clear that somebody was afraid we wouldn’t give the Nixons enough credit."

But no one could stop Jo Haldeman from keeping a meticulous history of her own experiences in Washington. She filled thick scrapbooks with the intimate photos she took, and included her comments. And later she filled up hundreds of three-by-five recipe cards with anecdotes of people and events.

Both as photographer and amateur diarist, Jo had a good eye for minute detail and character.

"Bob's staff party aboard Sequoia [Presidential yacht], Met John Dean first time, 9-16-71. Interesting man. 'Singing' bachelor. Administration needs more like him.”

"Camp David. Twenty trips, spent total of 54 days. Much to do there. Bowling, skeet shooting, volley ball, tennis, bicycle paths, We would use all these facilities freely unless we knew the President was coming outside. Then we'd scramble to remove ourselves!"

"Presidential helicopters: In Florida, Nixon would often begin a trip by personally driving his golf cart to the waiting helicopter. And once, in San Clemente, we lifted off in a storm."

The 'copter shook so fearfully that we put down again, and Henry Kissinger said, 'If it wasn't for the honor, I think I'd prefer to take the bus.'"

8-13-71. Ellsberg and the Pentagon papers. John Ehrlichman and Bob intrigued. Lunch aboard the Sequoia. Bob helped himself to plate of roast beef from buffet, caught his leg on the piano, lost his plate. It sailed clear across room like a Frisbee... a steward, walking through door, calmly caught the plate, keeping all food intact except for a shower of peas. Returned it to Bob. What service!"

Her scrapbooks contain provocative and amusing photographs. One shows a White House wife calmly reading a paperback aboard Air Force One. The title is clearly visible: The President’s Plane Is Missing. Another shows the Haldemans happily munching on an elaborate buffet of cold cuts and salads at Key Biscayne. This was not White House largesse; rather, it had been a gift sent to the President by friends and supporters. "Wherever the Nixons went,” Jo says, "people sent food. For security reasons, the Secret Service wouldn't allow the President to eat it. So occasionally, (continued)"
HALDEMAN continued

they sent it over to us." The king's tasters.

Jo Haldeman liked most of the women whose husbands worked for Richard Nixon, but Martha Mitchell caused mixed feelings. "I only saw her once or twice at parties. I thought of her sympathetically as a 'character.' Basically, though, I believe she was an embarrassment to the administration. At one party, Martha started flirting with Bob; I think she considered him a challenge. But when she tried to sit in his lap, I knew that Martha had struck out. Nothing would turn Bob off more quickly. Overall, John Mitchell's attentions were really sweet toward her. He would just puff his pipe and look at her with admiration. He seemed totally devoted."

An outsider would surmise that Martha Mitchell breathed a little fresh air into the Nixon Administration by saying what she damn well pleased. Jo disagrees. "I think she was contriving to say what she thought the press wanted to hear. Martha enjoyed the attention and the publicity. Once she was visiting across the street from our house. Our youngest daughter, Ann, happened to be selling lemonade. When Martha heard about it, she came over and bought a glass of lemonade. But she also brought a photographer with her. Naturally, she got her picture in the evening paper."

All this, though, was relatively harmless. The days to come were difficult and more dangerous for everyone. The first time that Jo could remember being worried about Watergate was on October 25, 1972, when The Washington Post ran a front-page article by reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein under the headline, "TESTIMONY TIES TOP NIXON AIDE TO SECRET FUND." It claimed that Bob Haldeman had supervision over a $700,000 secret slush fund. Hitherto, the Post articles on the Watergate break-in had not caused much concern, other than Jo worrying about their "public relations effect" on the Nixon re-election campaign, then in its climactic moments.

"I was really concerned," remembers Jo. "I pressed Bob for an answer. He was amazed. He totally shrugged the story off. He said he might well have such authority to sign checks, but if so, he was totally unaware of it."

As Watergate grew darker, and a climax of concern enveloped the White House, the issues were discussed openly by the Haldeman family in a realistic, nonemotional way. "Bob was always frank with me. He is totally direct and honest. Bob really thought (continued)
Haldeman
continued from page 55

prosecutor and says, 'I'm going to get you.' We return to 'our' rooms, but the camaraderie has vanished. Once again we are fragmented... Outside, a freak windstorm has come up. Rain blows against the windows... I must call our beloved families in California... How strange this is..."

The Haldemans returned to Los Angeles and bought a smaller Tudor home in the Hancock Park section. Jo decorated it with little enthusiasm. "I was in limbo and still am," she says.

A stranger who comes to the home would not immediately know that a man who had been the second most powerful man in Washington lived there. Only a few souvenirs of the Nixon years are on display in the downstairs area, some scrapbooks are stacked in a corner of the den, and a tapestry of the Great Wall of China hangs above a sofa. There are no photographs of Richard Nixon downstairs, although an upstairs office is filled with them.

Downstairs, Jo has put out photographs of her children, her parents and her in-laws.

Financial burden shifts
On the last plane ride home from Washington, Jo assessed her family's situation and realized that the financial burden was now on her. Bob's immediate future clearly would be spent working on legal appeals. And, if they failed, he faced a prison sentence. She reviewed his job possibilities. But, when Bob gave her a real-estate course as a gift, that was clearly not immediately feasible.

"The only way to get this behind us, really behind us, was for my husband to go to prison and satisfy those who felt he should be punished."

At the prison's administration building, they kissed and Jo attempted to smile. She watched Bob disappear inside. He carried only a paper bag containing his shaving kit and some Christian Science books. Later, the prison sent home his pants, his belt and a pair of toenail clippers. They were forbidden, she was informed.

When Jo returned home from taking Bob to Lompoc, the telephone was ringing, and Henry Kissinger was on the line. He wanted her to know that his thoughts had been with her on this difficult moment. "I can't talk now, Henry," she apologized, breaking down and sobbing for the first time. She remembered that Kissinger had also been the first to call after Bob's resignation.

A few months later, when school began, the children dispersed, and Jo, left alone, was faced with the reality that her husband would be a federal prisoner for perhaps as long as eight years. Now came the time for sorting out her feelings about people who had shared the Watergate drama with her.

The broken marriage of John and Jeanne Ehrlichman is particularly saddening to Jo, for she believes that Watergate destroyed a very tender union. "They are among the most poignant casualties," she says.

And John Dean
And then there's John Dean. "He lacked loyalty and acted totally in his own behalf." She can find only a few major inaccuracies in either his Watergate appearances, or in his book. However, "His revelations were self-serving and distorted the presidency and the events."

What about Richard Nixon?
When Jo Haldeman thinks of the fallen President, and speaks about him, it is with considerable difficulty. Her normally lucid sentences become almost inarticulate, and she frequently pauses. Curiously, there is no bitterness, at least none that she has shown to anyone.

"It's so difficult to even (continued)

Haldeman
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began talking about President Nixon," she says cautiously. "As far as Watergate goes, I certainly don't admire the President's actions. However, I—and I mean this with tremendous sincerity—I think what happened to Bob, to John Ehrlichman and to John Mitchell has been very hard on Richard Nixon. I feel that it has affected him emotionally... deeply... it's just that he's not able to express these feelings openly... What to say?... 'Gee, I'm sorry'?... Often people wonder why I'm not bitter... But I'm not. Bob served a cause and, if he could turn back the clock, he would consider it a privilege to serve again... Maybe this sounds Pollyannish—but it's how I feel..."

Richard Nixon has telephoned "a few times" since his downfall. Once, to wish Jo and Bob a happy anniversary; the other times to check facts he needed for his book. But as to their fate, Jo has never heard a word, either from the former President or his wife.

Some of Jo Haldeman's friends find this appalling, but Jo does not. "There are lines at Lompoc Prison that Bob cannot step across until he is released," she points out. "But the walls at San Clemente are inescapable. There are all kinds of prisons. I'll take Lompoc..."

Friends often ask Jo what she and Bob will do when he is released. What will their ordinal leave on their marriage? Jo sums it up candidly and gracefully:

"There was more strain on my marriage from being a Washington wife than from enduring Watergate. The funny thing is that Watergate strengthened our relationship and our love. In Washington, Bob Haldeman was very much married to the White House. Now Bob Haldeman is very much married to me. And I like it."