

Conversation Number 344-6
June 20, 1972, 4:35 P.M.-5:25 P.M.
Executive Office Building
Nixon and Haldeman

[Haldeman enters with a "Hi."]

PRESIDENT: Hi. Too bad we can't do business in Florida this weekend.

[After a brief discussion of Florida weather and fishing, the president mentions a report from Herb Stein, who he says writes so much better than his other economic advisers. Haldeman says Paul McCracken "always hedged everything." Nixon says McCracken's just so cautious he said nothing. Haldeman says when there was good news, Stein said so. When there was bad news, he said so, and here's how we fix it. The president quickly cuts from the discussion of the writing skills of his economic advisers to the following.]

PRESIDENT: Have you gotten any further on that Mitchell operation?

HALDEMAN: No. [This is spoken very softly, as if he is looking at papers rather than the president, and the next remarks are unclear because they talk over one another about Mitchell, speculating on his knowledge of the operation at the DNC's Watergate offices.]

PRESIDENT: He didn't.

HALDEMAN: I don't think he did.

PRESIDENT: I think he was surprised.

HALDEMAN: I think, I think that's right. I don't think he knew they were going to [break in.] [cross talking]

PRESIDENT: I also think this. I think that the reason [unclear].

HALDEMAN: These guys apparently are a pretty competent bunch of people, and they've been doing other things very well, apparently.

PRESIDENT: If Mitchell lies [unclear].

HALDEMAN: My goodness, the stuff, all they had in there [unclear]. They had a three-channel transmitter. Two of the channels went out.

PRESIDENT: [unclear]

HALDEMAN: Get those untangled. Get the pictures of the stuff that comes out.

PRESIDENT: Well, Mitchell should be [unclear]. It's his problem.

HALDEMAN: That's, that's, I haven't talked to him since this. They have filed a suit.

PRESIDENT: The Democratic committee.

HALDEMAN: They directly sued the Committee for Re-Election and the Republican National Committee for a million dollars: \$100,000 damages and \$900,000 punitive. Quite a sum. They want to take depositions on all this crap.

PRESIDENT: I don't know what the law is. I mean, I don't know how long it takes.

HALDEMAN: Dean said that's the kind of thing, once they file and a judge orders, sets the thing, and starts the suit going and all, you could stall it for a couple of months, probably down to [the election] with technical delays and pleadings.

PRESIDENT: [unclear reference about Colson]

HALDEMAN: Poor guy gets, having—

PRESIDENT: He got blamed. A little more, a little more sympathy.

HALDEMAN: Right. I know he's sensitive. Very hyper-sensitive [unclear].

PRESIDENT: [chuckling] Did you see that God damn thing?

HALDEMAN: The guy, there is a tie to that one guy. That's Hunt.

PRESIDENT: He said he didn't—

HALDEMAN: [unclear]

PRESIDENT: It's fortunately, it's fortunately a bizarre story.

HALDEMAN: Yes.

PRESIDENT: Don't you agree?

HALDEMAN: But its bizarreness almost helps to discredit it.

PRESIDENT: [unclear] ...the Mansfield comment.

HALDEMAN: Yeah.

PRESIDENT: On McCord, how was he employed?

HALDEMAN: He was on a regular monthly retainer fee.

PRESIDENT: Does he have other clients?

HALDEMAN: And he had a regular monthly fee at the National Committee also. In fact, there is a potential problem at the National Committee. Apparently he set up, installed some television closed-circuit monitoring stuff, and then they have six guards and some supervisors [unclear].

PRESIDENT: [If he talks, is he going to say he employed the Cubans, is that right?]

HALDEMAN: I don't know. McCord, I guess—

PRESIDENT: Let's say Hunt is [unclear].

HALDEMAN: McCord, I guess, will say that he was working with the Cubans. He wanted, they wanted to put this in for their own political reasons. But Hunt's disappeared, or is in the process of disappearing. He can un-disappear if we want him to do so. He's planned for this day all along and has a whole process set up, disappear to a Latin American country. But that, at least the original thought was, that that was good, that he might want to disappear, mainly because he can on the basis that these guys, the Cubans, see he was in the Bay of Pigs thing. One of the Cubans, Barker, the guy with the American name, was his deputy in the Bay of Pigs operation and so they're kind of trying to tie it to the Cuban Nationalists business.

PRESIDENT: We are?

HALDEMAN: Yeah. [pause in conversation for several seconds] Yeah, the original thing, the original story—

PRESIDENT: The Cuban—

HALDEMAN: [continues talking over the president] —based it pretty much that way. Now, of course, they're uncovering these ties to Colson, to the White House [unclear].

PRESIDENT: [unclear]

HALDEMAN: It's strange. If Colson doesn't run out, it doesn't go anywhere.

PRESIDENT: That's right.

HALDEMAN: The closest they come, he [referring to Hunt] was a consultant to Colson. We have detailed—

PRESIDENT: Do we know what he did, somewhat the nature of his consulting fee?

HALDMAN: And said it was basically [unclear]. I don't know about this.

PRESIDENT: You don't know what he did then?

HALDEMAN: [There's a pause, and then the conversation becomes even more hushed. From the intermittent words that can be heard, Haldeman further concedes ignorance, and Nixon speculates about Colson's activities with Hunt.]

PRESIDENT: Colson's protested his innocence, in this. As I've told you I've come to the conclusion that Colson's not that dumb.

HALDEMAN: I don't think he, I think, well, in fact, we all knew that there were some—

PRESIDENT: Intelligence [things.]

HALDEMAN: Some activities, and we were getting reports, or some input here and there. But I don't think, I don't think Chuck knew specifically that, you know, this project was under way or that these people were involved.

PRESIDENT: But [Mitchell], if he did, ah, well, I'm second-guessing.

HALDEMAN: He seems to take all the blame himself.

PRESIDENT: Did he? Good.

HALDEMAN: He was saying this morning that it was damn stupid for him to not learn about the details and know exactly what was going on.

[The conversation takes a brief tangent when the president asks about security, and Haldeman advises him that they, the Secret Service, swept his office and telephones twice a week. As for their own internal recording system, the president says the Oval Office conversations were the most important. Haldeman says, "They say it's extremely good. I haven't listened to the tapes." Nixon says, "They're just kept for our future purposes." Haldeman reassures him, "Nobody monitors those tapes, obviously. They are kept stacked up and locked up in a super-secure [unclear], there are only three people that know they exist." Then the conversation returns to Watergate.]

PRESIDENT: There's nothing we can do to help Mitchell out. [The president sounds plaintive.]

HALDEMAN: I've been trying to think about that, and I want to talk to him—

PRESIDENT: [He's in for a fall, for bad judgment.]

HALDEMAN: There's nothing, you [tape noise]. I, I feel like this is a nightmare. When you think about it, you think it can't be true. Something like this just doesn't happen.

PRESIDENT: I agree with that completely— [tape noise].

HALDEMAN: That is, that is—

PRESIDENT: As far as I'm [concerned].

HALDEMAN: He can sit there, can't perjure himself, or he'll end up part of [it]. As is, fortunately, John [Ehrlichman] thinks, circumstantially, he hasn't done the specifics. So now, some portion, because if he had it probably wouldn't have happened. [There is the tone for withdrawn material; apparently an exchange of dark humor considered personal.] Seriously, now, I think you should probably call Mitchell and say I've got to get somebody that can check things out, and be sure we're secure. Anyway, call him, say, get this guy over here and have him check your phones, that's important.

PRESIDENT: [unclear] Involves who?

HALDEMAN: It's everybody with any knowledge all the way through. [It sounds like the president has picked up the phone and makes a request of the White House operator, which is not audible in the room recording. Haldeman continues.] Starting to get all the circumstantial stuff. I think, maybe, it is better to, ah—

PRESIDENT: What?

HALDEMAN: It may be its better to plead guilty, saying we were spying on the Democrats. Just let the Cubans say, we are with McCord because, ah, we're with the Republicans, we figured he was a safe guy for us to use.

PRESIDENT: Well, they've got to plead guilty and get this stuff behind them, as fast as they can.

HALDEMAN: And then, we [referring to the Cubans] did this because we're scared to death that this crazy man's going to become President and sell the U.S. out to the communists.

PRESIDENT: [The audio is unclear for 19 seconds, in which the president clearly poses a question.]

HALDEMAN: Everybody else seemed to think it was a good idea.

PRESIDENT: I wonder about [unclear]. Where is he?

HALDEMAN: He isn't involved in this, I don't think. He was in on the Diem thing.

PRESIDENT: Oh yeah, yeah.

HALDEMAN: See, Hunt was the guy who [unclear] [Lucien] Conein. Hunt's a friend of

Colson's. [tone for withdrawn material]

PRESIDENT: How was he [Hunt] directly involved?

HALDEMAN: He was across the street in the Howard Johnson Motel with a direct-line-of-sight room, observing across the street. And that was the room in which they had the receiving equipment for the bugs.

PRESIDENT: Well, does Hunt work for McCord, or what?

HALDEMAN: No. Oh, we don't know. I don't know. I don't know if that's one, that's something I haven't gotten into is how, apparently McCord had Hunt working with him, or Hunt had McCord working with him and with these Cubans. They're all tied together. Hunt, when he ran the Bay of Pigs thing, was working with this guy Barker, one of the Cubans who was arrested.

PRESIDENT: How does the press know about this?

HALDEMAN: They don't. Oh, they know Hunt's involved because they found his name in the address book of two of the Cubans, Barker's book and one of the other guy's books.

PRESIDENT: [unclear]

HALDEMAN: He's identified as "White House." And also because one of the Cubans had a check from Hunt, a check for six dollars and ninety cents, or something like that, which Hunt had given to this Cuban to take back to Miami with him and mail. It was to pay his country club bill. And one of his identities is, is a Cuban base, or I mean, a Miami base, and he uses [unclear].

PRESIDENT: Hunt?

HALDEMAN: Hunt, yes. Probably so he can pay non-resident dues at the country club or something. But anyway, they had that check, so that was another tie.

PRESIDENT: Well, in a sense, [people won't be surprised by] the fact that Hunt's involved with the Cubans, or McCord's involved with the Cubans and so forth. Here are the Cuban people [unclear]. [Colson reference] But I don't think he's, I don't think he should be concerned over that [unclear]. We'll get one of our guys up there responding to the press. And, ah, Colson—

HALDEMAN: Especially the guy involved with the whole, peripherally involved.

PRESIDENT: Colson can handle himself, though. We'll get him involved. Anyone

* As Haldeman would later learn, it was Alfred Baldwin and James McCord who used this line-of-sight room, and, after the arrests on June 17, 1972, Hunt went to the room to give Baldwin instructions to pack up the listening equipment and get out of town.

investigating [The exchange that follows is unclear, but the president wonders what they are investigating.].

HALDEMAN: Wiretapping. Take a look into the legislation.

PRESIDENT: The law here is [unclear] going to change, I would think. [unclear]

HALDEMAN: It would seem to me the toughest thing they've got for us at this point is the deposition business. It seems to me that [Joe] Califano's as hard a guy as they've got.

[The president refers to the Democratic primary, which they discuss briefly, but they quickly return to Watergate and the side conversation abruptly ends a 38-second tone of withdrawn material.]

HALDEMAN: If anything, it's the other way on this matter with Mitchell. If Colson knew about it, he was not involved with it, I'm sure.

[The president and Haldeman start speaking in soft, barely audible voices, wherein they agree on Colson.]

PRESIDENT: My God, the committee isn't worth bugging in my opinion. That's my public line. [This statement is a clear, loudly stated declaration, but Haldeman's reminder causes the president to retreat.]

HALDEMAN: Except for this financial thing. They thought they had something going on that.

PRESIDENT NIXON: Yeah, I suppose, I suppose. [He speaks wearily.]

HALDEMAN: But I asked that question: If we were going to all that trouble, why in the world would we pick the Democratic National Committee to do it to? It's the least fruitful source.

[Another 23 minutes of withdrawn material ends the Watergate discussion, and when the conversation resumes, they are discussing announcements regarding Vietnam and the timing of the forthcoming press conference. They close by talking about motorcade security. At 5:25 PM Haldeman leaves the EOB Office, but he would soon hear from Nixon at home.]