

Conversation Number 739-11
June 21, 1972, 1:24-3:11 P.M.
Oval Office
President and Haldeman

[Following a session with Ehrlichman about vetoing the higher education bill because of a busing provision, and again no discussion of Watergate whatsoever as with the June 20th conversation, Haldeman arrived in the Oval Office at 1:24 P.M. They briefly discussed the president's meeting a few hours earlier with New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Senator James Buckley, and Secretary of Transportation John Volpe. Three minutes and seven seconds of personal material had been withdrawn by NARA. Watergate is only incidentally discussed in this conversation.]

[The president wanted to look at material where Jack Anderson falsely charged Rebozo as being involved with the Watergate burglars. He did not want to use the material himself, but he wanted to be in a position of saying "no comment" at his press conference and doing so based on an awareness of the content of the charge. As he explained to Haldeman, he was supposed to know such things. They next discussed the schedule for the forthcoming trip to California, then a documentary film on a day in the life of the president, which would require about forty-five minutes of his time for staged shots, followed by parochial school aid, White House staff writers, and then Watergate.]

PRESIDENT: Got anything further on our bugging incident?

HALDEMAN: Well—

PRESIDENT: [Unclear] still bothering us. You're right, you're right in one sense, it's very important for you to keep very close to Mitchell in term of the PR [unclear.]

HALDEMAN: It's really hard as hell for Chuck to keep out of it, but I really think this is one where there's little he can add to it, and a lot he can, he just can't emotionally detract from it.

PRESIDENT: It's pretty hard heavy-handed, you know, it's ripped the hell out of him. Just keep him the hell out of it, I couldn't agree more. I'll hold his hand, and keep him [unclear.]

HALDEMAN: Yeah, that's it. Keep busy on his other things, and not brood about his problems. [Tone for withdrawn material, followed by a brief conversation about Maurice Stans, who had reminded Haldeman they had many Democratic contributors who did not wish to be identified. This exchange will become important because of the problem Haldeman will bring to the president two days later, on June 23.]

PRESIDENT: Have you ever, were you able to talk to Stans about the thought of getting out those damn names?

HALDEMAN: Yeah, I was able to do that.

PRESIDENT: Can you get out virtually all of them? Probably virtually all of 'em?

HALDEMAN: Probably. Most of 'em, many of them, yeah. He's got to leave some out. See, a good part of it, he's, he, ah, which I didn't realize, he has a lot of—

PRESIDENT: Cash?

HALDEMAN: —Many Democrats. No. People who, who, who [gave] money on the commitment they will not be revealed as contributors.

PRESIDENT: Then you have the [denomination to worry about,] they might, but let me say this—

HALDEMAN: [Cross talking.]

PRESIDENT: It is important for you to have, to keep on this, because [unclear] an issue. I don't need to put out the amounts. I don't need to do that. But if we get their names, I don't mean all their names, ever.

HALDEMAN: But what you can do, and what he's going to, is, is move back on all the ones you can and get another contribution from 'em, so they can. They're listed in the reported list.

PRESIDENT: And you can say these people contributed before as well.

HALDEMAN: Yeah, that's right. That's what he's going to say.

PRESIDENT: Say these contributions are second, these people contributed before, and so forth.

[After a discussion of McGovern's spending, the conversation returned to a Watergate-related matter.]

PRESIDENT: You will undoubtedly find there's going to be another bugging incident. Probably against us, or [unclear.] [Stakes are too high to try one.]

HALDEMAN: Sure. I think what they're doing, on us now—

PRESIDENT: Thing to do, it's on every, I'm sure its already occurred to you already, but on the PR side, every time there's a leaked from the White House or campaign headquarters, charged that we're being bugged. Frankly. Don't you agree?

HALDEMAN: Yeah.

PRESIDENT: [Unclear. Do it to ourselves.] Plant a device sometime. Do it if there's anybody you can trust. Although I think you can trust, apparently, these, these Cubans, the Cubans.

HALDEMAN: Get these guys to do it.

PRESIDENT: No, really, I think they're, probably are, to his credit, Hunt's probably been dealt some pretty [tough guys.]

HALDEMAN: What I've suggested—

PRESIDENT: [Unclear about Cubans] the way they do operate, you know. They swear on this and that, their own blood, and so forth. [Silence.] [When the president next speaks, he tells Haldeman, "one thing you have to have in mind too, Bob, is the PR." Comparing the overreaction during the ITT blowup, and while tapping a finger rhythmically on his desk, the president instructs Haldeman to not over-respond to the news media on the Watergate matter, and the conversation end on this note. The president can be heard yawning after the conversation ends, and he places a call to Colson, while Haldeman remains seated by his desk. Ron Ziegler arrived in the Oval Office at 2:15 P.M. and they discussed the forthcoming press conference, which included their first conversation about Watergate about twenty minutes into their discussion:] "What do you want me to say about the, ah, the bugging incident, and so forth?"

ZEIGLER: Nothing.

PRESIDENT: Were you there? [Flatly asked, without a hint of jest.]

ZEIGLER: At the bugging incident? [Incredulous.]

PRESIDENT: You were part of that job?

ZEIGLER: You mean [laughing] was I at the Watergate [further laughter]?

HALDEMAN: Actually, Ron had a good cover, he was [unclear.]

PRESIDENT: [Unclear, then referring to the burglars:] These guys were merely trying to win a Pulitzer Prize.

HALDEMAN: Yeah.

PRESIDENT: So, the *New York Times* [published] stolen documents, and they get a Pulitzer Prize for it. Jack Anderson stole White House documents, Top Secret classification, he gets the Prize for it. Now what the hell is this? Breaking and entering, [unclear] the goddamn thing—

HALDEMAN: Do you think the Cubans are entitled to a Pulitzer Prize too?

ZEIGLER: [Unclear.] [Ron seems a little speechless at this point.]

PRESIDENT: They're trying to, they're trying to win a Pulitzer Prize. [Softly said.] But, ah—

ZIEGLER: Actually, the, actually the, all the—

PRESIDENT: I don't know.

HALDEMAN: [Unclear.] He should actually just say that—

PRESIDENT: I mean, Pat [Buchanan]'s stuff is too long, way too long. I think it's good, but—

ZEIGLER: We sent a memo in to you on this, this, with a series of Q's and A's. We sent short answers it, ah, but I don't—

PRESIDENT: I don't want to get into it that much.

ZEIGLER: —I don't think you should really say a thing. Actually, the networks last night, in the reports, doesn't come over this way in the News Summary, but in the reports there was more tongue-in-cheek, just the way, not tongue-in-cheek, but they had the look and the tone of presentation. Did you see it Bob?

HALDEMAN: I saw it where—

ZEIGLER: Where, where it was funny, not comical but just—

PRESIDENT: “Here's what happened in politics.”

HALDEMAN: “Here's what happened in Washington.”

PRESIDENT: Right.

ZEIGLER: My, my view is if they ask you, and they will ask you—

PRESIDENT: Oh, sure.

ZEIGLER: Would, would be simply to say, I have nothing to say about that. The appropriate, ah, legal agencies, through the due processes of law, as attorney general Mitchell has already pointed out, and we pointed out at the White House, obviously this has no place in the political system. Now the “what” is the next question. Not in a, not in a hard way, [cross talk] just in a brush off way.

PRESIDENT: I think it would be best to say [unclear] Mr. Mitchell, and Mr. Zeigler, each [unclear.]

ZEIGLER: Right. But this is already [getting play.]

HALDEMAN: Yeah.

PRESIDENT: [Unclear] be the headline. I can say, as the matter stands, that it would be inappropriate [unclear.]

ZEIGLER: Appropriate authorities.

PRESIDENT: [Unclear.]

ZEIGLER: The full processes of law will be, will be carried out.

PRESIDENT: [Hopefully, that'll be enough.]

[Following withdrawn material, the conversation returned to other matters like Haldeman reporting they had won a vote on the Revenue Sharing bill in the House of Representatives, and they would prevail unless the Senate screwed it up, which would not be a surprise to the president. Zeigler reported how good Rockefeller was before the press, as he demonstrated in the news room. Zeigler, Haldeman, and the president discuss how fairly they have treated the press, and Zeigler says many have told him no president has treated them as well. Nonetheless, the president says, "there has probably never been a press corps as antagonistic to a president as this one." Zeigler says the press is tough on issues they care about, like Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, the demonstrations in Washington - "their colors come out on the hard, tough, gut issue, where decisions had to be made, and it was contrary to their beliefs, they came on like a pack of raving wolves." Ziegler says there are press conference and briefing transcripts to prove it. The president noted, "the press is not supposed to write based on their beliefs. They are supposed to report, and that is where they have failed." The president says the Washington press corps comes at him as advocates. He said he was not talking about the columnists, who are supposed to be advocates, but the reporter who is an advocate, and is hostile to the president, is not being true to his profession. If a reporter does not like a president personally, that is an entirely different thing. The president said, "I read the New Summary not for the purpose of getting any guidance for an assault on these people [who are so hostile] but simply to see what my problem is in communicating with the country. If the sons-of-a-bitch said this, [and its wrong], then I have to knock it down. It is not for any personal animosity or anything like that. It's simply that I realize they're against us on certain issues," so they have to find a response. The president noted the difference from Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson, who were always worried about the kind of press they got, "but I don't give a damn about what kind of press I get... I used to worry about the kind of press I got, but my only concern now is a far different thing, and this is what irritates them beyond belief." He continued, "Instead of worrying about what kind of press I get, my only concern is about what kind of job I do. Because I know if I do a good job it doesn't make any difference if

the press is good or not, bad or not. If I do a bad job, the good press can't say, can't help me. So screw 'em... Now they influence people, I am not questioning that, and for that reason I must pay attention to them." The president had said three year earlier, about the *New York Times*, "I said the thing I am really concerned about, if I were in the Washington press corps, as a columnist, or writing editorials for the *New York Times*, or the *Washington Post*, or *Time*, or doing commentary, who is the most important viewer or reader or listener that I have, who is the one in the world, most important viewer or subscriber you have? Obviously, it's the president of the United States. And they lost him. That's what they've done." He gave the reason, "Because I know their bias is so deep on the issues that matter that they're not rational, so therefore, I have no reason to pay any attention to them."

Ziegler noted that Johnson went the other way; he let them feel that they were important. "Now the press are vain, self-righteous, selfish, group of people, there's no question about that," Ziegler added. "Now you can use those weaknesses that they have. But you can also allow them to overtake you, and Johnson allowed them to over take him." Ziegler says Johnson wined and dined them, trying to persuade them, which they talk about with disrespect. "What you have done, postured, aloof from them, that's the wrong word, a distance from them ... and kept them off balance, which has lead them, from the personal side, to develop a deep respect for you, there's no question about that in my mind. I am not talking about the editorial writers, and all the rest, I'm talking about the guys who mean something, the editorial writers don't mean a damn thing. The reporters, and the people who report, without question in my mind, have a respect for you. They have their own bias which effects there reports, there's no question about that. Their swayed by their bias, which is something we have to recognize and deal with. But they do have a respect for the President of the United States," Ziegler said, "which they did not have before."

The conversation ended with the president again telling Ron that he did not give a damn what the press said about him, and he suspected they knew that, but there was no reason to tell them. At 3:11 P.M. the president departed the Oval Office with Haldeman and Ziegler, and headed over to his EOB Office.]