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Hickel's Advisers Tell Why He Acted

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WASHINGTON, May 7 — "Why Wally Hickel?" That was the question asked all over this city today. How was it that Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel — a former Governor of Alaska, a self-made millionaire, a heating and plumbing contractor, owner of shopping centers, hotels and expensive housing developments — how was it that this man, regarded by some as so square, should be the one member of the Cabinet to write a letter to President Nixon saying bluntly that his Administration was consciously alienating the young people of America by failing to communicate with them? "It came right from the heart and it was meant for the President," said one Interior De-

partment official today who is a trusted adviser to the Secretary.

The official went on to express regret that the letter had somehow leaked to the press, but he volunteered the feeling that, however much the White House might be angered by this leak and however much pressure was put on Mr. Hickel, the Secretary would not recant or retreat from his deeply held conviction that leaders of the nation had an obligation

"to communicate with our youth and listen to their ideas and problems."

There was no doubt here, considering the risks to his political career, that Mr. Hickel had spoken from the heart. And there was not much doubt that he would not recant—his stubbornness is a byword.

But what had made him believe he must carry his dissent to the President? What influences had reinforced his own feelings? What events had preceded the sending of the letter?

To these questions, there came answers today from some of Mr. Hickel's closest associates who spoke freely but not for attribution.

And their answers served to dispel some rumors here that

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the letter had been stage-managed by the White House, presumably in an effort to establish a belated Presidential liaison with the young people.

One man who has long been close to the Secretary gave this account today of the genesis of the letter.

"First," he said, "there was Hickel's own feelings about the Vietnam war. He has been increasingly turned off by it. He has said repeatedly [to friends] that 'If it comes to a choice between continuing the war in order to win it and the risk of increasing the contention in the country, with people set against people, I'm in favor of pulling out even if we lose it.'"

Second this aide said, Mr. Hickel has undoubtedly been considerably influenced by three young assistants—Malcolm Roberts; Michael Levett, a graduate of the University of California law school at Los Angeles and a White House Fellow on assignment to the Interior Department; and Pat Ryan, formerly Mr. Hickel's special assistant when he was Governor of Alaska.

All of these assistants, it was said, have grave doubts about Vietnam policy and all have a sympathetic understanding of the problems of the young. Mr. Levett, for example, was once an assistant to former Senator Ernest L. Gruening, Democrat of Alaska, one of the earliest and most implacable critics of the war.

Meetings With Students

Third, according to this informant, Mr. Hickel has talked with a large number of college students who came to the Interior Department in connection with SCOPE (Student Councils on Pollution and Environment), a program sponsored

by the Interior Department over the Christmas holidays. He saw many more in connection with Interior's participation in earth day on April 22.

"He's sensitive and perceptive to things he's seen and heard around him," one of his aides said today. On one occasion, he talked with nine students [in connection with SCOPE] for four hours. He became convinced of the seriousness and purpose of the young people."

Another aide said of these meetings with young people: "They had a real impact. He feels they are good kids, idealistic kids."

This associate said that the events in the last few days brought the Secretary's concern to the point of resolution.

The Cambodian Decision

"Before the President's speech announcing the Cambodian invasion last Thursday night," the aide said, "the President briefed the Cabinet. Hickel was very disturbed by the escalation. He was also disturbed by the President's statement in his speech about 'great universities being systematically destroyed,' and his off-hand characterization of student dissenters the next day as 'bums.'"

"After the Cambodian invasion," the aide went on, "there was a regularly scheduled staff meeting at Interior in which there was much discussion of the President's move. As a result of the discussion, Hickel got this thing that he had to go to the White House and talk to the President personally and make him see the error of his ways."

On Monday, the day of the Kent College killings, Mr. Hickel called the two eldest of his six sons — Walter, 21 years old, at the University of Alaska, and Jack, at the University of San Francisco.

"They were very upset," the

aide related, adding that the Secretary has been very close to his sons. "After the telephone calls, he made up his mind he had to do something," the aide said, continuing:

"Through Pat Ryan, he tried to set up an appointment with the President. He was turned down, presumably by a White House aide. He then tried to see John Ehrlichman [Presidential assistant for domestic affairs] and he was out of town.

"Wally felt he just had to get it off his chest, and he called Rogers on Tuesday and said, 'I've just to talk to you.' And Bill Rogers said, 'Come on over.' When he finished talking, he said, Rogers said to him, 'I agree with you.'"

When Mr. Hickel returned to his office, the aide said, he decided that, if Secretary of State Rogers agreed with him, he would write a letter to the President. He wrote a rough draft before going home and worked on it at home that night. Then on Wednesday, May 6, after talking with some of his advisers, he revised it and sent it off.

'England's Cambodia'

The aide related that Mr. Hickel, in order to make certain of his point about the youthfulness of the leaders of the "violent" colonial protest against England preceding the Revolution, had one of his assistants look up ages of Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe. The aide also said that in the early draft of the letter, Mr. Hickel called the American Revolution "England's Cambodia."

The first reaction of the White House to the letter and the leak, the aide said, was one of anger. A White House assistant, it was related, called Mr. Ryan, the Secretary's personal assistant, and a

said: "If you find the S.O.B. responsible for leaking that letter I want you to fire him." To which Mr. Ryan was said to have replied: "If you find the S.O.B. responsible for not letting Hickel see the President, I want you to fire him."

This afternoon the Interior Department issued a statement saying the department had been "swamped" with telegrams and telephone calls on the Secretary's letter, and that the comments were "overwhelmingly favorable."

'Another Right Arm'

There was one call that indicated that the White House was fully aware of the impact of the letter and was attempting to convert the Secretary's new popularity into a line of communication between the President and the young.

John Ehrlichman, it was learned, called Mr. Hickel and said he was "offering him another right arm — the President's."

Mr. Hickel likes man-to-man dealings, and this, his friends say, accounts for his suggestion to the President yesterday that "you consider meeting, on an individual and conversational basis, with members of your Cabinet." He has seen the President privately only twice in 15 months.

He also chafes at restraints. Since Henry A. Kissinger, the President's foreign affairs adviser in the White House, has twice blocked his acceptance of an invitation by the Soviet Government to visit Russia, Mr. Hickel is not much enamored by Mr. Kissinger, according to his friends.

Mr. Hickel often talks like an unreconstructed, 19th-century, laissez-faire capitalist, and he has been an aggressive entrepreneur. But, his friends all attest, he thinks of himself as a populist.