

David S. Broder

Restaffing The White House

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If President Nixon weathers this winter's Watergate wobbles and settles in for the "three more years" he insists he intends to serve, then the question of the restaffing of the White House will again become a central one — for him and the country.

The announced departure plans of domestic adviser Melvin R. Laird and chief counselor-troubleshooter Bryce Harlow, now scheduled to occur within the first six weeks of the new year, represent only the tip of the iceberg.

At least a dozen experienced second-echelon hands, concentrated in the White House offices that handle the creation and articulation of domestic programs and the solicitation of congressional and community support for them, are also restive and itching to go.

Some are men who came in with Mr. Nixon five years ago, having worked in his campaign; many are under wifely pressure to get into jobs with shorter hours and higher future earning potential.

Others, however, are not suffering primarily from fatigue but from skepticism about the White House enterprise, and it is their reasons for restiveness that are worrisome.

Already, within the White House, there is serious concern about the clotting of power in too few hands, and the danger that Mr. Nixon may slip back into the pattern of isolation that, it is generally agreed, allowed the Watergate abuses to occur.

When H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman were disenthroned last spring, the symbols of the new regime brought in to replace them were Laird, Harlow and Alexander Haig. The first two are preparing to leave again — not

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in disillusionment, they insist, but because they have other fish to fry — and Haig is visibly bowing under the burden of a job which is not quite what he thought it would be.

Career soldier Haig, who replaced Haldeman as the President's chief of staff, is not given to complaint. But colleagues say he has had little opportunity to do what he took to be his mission — organizing the work of the President's staff, as he had once organized Henry Kissinger's.

Instead, he has fallen into a routine with long hours of "hand-holding" for the President and long hours of coping with the Watergate legal problems and the lawyers who are supposed to attend them. At some senior staff meetings on substantive problems of government, Haig has been noted catching a brief but vitally needed nap.

To a surprising degree, the hopes of those concerned about what may happen at the White House next year now focus on Vice President Ford. Laird and Harlow have publicly cited Ford's arrival as the justification for their own departures. And presidential counselor Anne Armstrong points to Ford as the best antidote against a return to what she admits was the President's dangerous isolation from sound political advice in the Haldeman-Ehrlichman days.

Certainly, in his early days in office, Ford has been a visible presence at the President's elbow and in White House staff functions. Last week, he presided at meetings of White House aides and key congressional Republicans, discussing 1974 legislative proposals on health care, resource management and energy development.

He has, by his own testimony, seen the President or held lengthy telephone conversations with him virtually every day since his swearing-in to the No. 2 job. His predecessor, Spiro Agnew, knew no such privilege — ever.

But the history of vice presidential frustration is an old one. If Jerry Ford finds a way to convert his empty constitutional office into that of a principal staff aide and communications channel for the President, he will be doing something that such talented men as Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were never able to do as Vice Presidents.

None of the recent Presidents has wanted his Vice President that close to him, and Richard Nixon is more chary about sharing power or intimacy than his predecessors. If Ford does indeed prove the answer to the looming White House staff problem, it will be another of Mr. Nixon's "historic firsts."