

Part 2/12/73

Hedging on Nixon's Staff Inflation

It was a long briefing at the White House, too long as it turned out for Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler. The departure of President Nixon's Coast Guard aide, Alex Larzelere, was being announced.

"Commander Larzelere is the Coast Guard aide to the President and he is being reassigned as part of the reorganization and streamlining of the White House staff," Ziegler said. "The President is reducing the number of military aides who are assigned to him and the position of Coast Guard aide to the President is being discontinued."

A half hour or so later it occurred to one of the reporters that Mr. Nixon was the first President to employ a Coast Guard aide. The following colloquy ensued, with Ziegler doing the answering:

Q—Ron, you said the President decided to eliminate the Coast Guard aide to cut back on the military aides. Didn't he put him in in the first place?

A—Yes, he did.

Q—I mean, there had not been a Coast Guard aide before Larzelere came in?

A—That is correct, but when he added them, it increased the military aide's office. Now that he is leaving, it reduces it.

The Larzelere incident, typical enough in its way of the delicate verisimilitude that marks many a Ziegler briefing, also perfectly illustrates the type of "staff reduction" for which the administration now takes credit.

"The White House staff has rather grown like Topsy," President Nixon said at Camp David last Nov. 27. "It has grown in every administration." The President's comment was accurate. During Mr. Nixon's first term, both the White House personal staff and the larger Executive Office of the President of which it is a part grew steadily. The administration now proposes to eliminate half of the 4,000 jobs in the executive office, chiefly through the expedient of abolishing the Office of Economic Opportunity.

At the same time, Mr. Nixon proposes to cut back the White House personal staff to slightly less than the size it had been when he took office. It was then about 550 persons, although the exact total was not known. The President's objective is to reduce the White House staff to about 480 persons.

While this is a laudable goal, it does not meet the President's own objective as stated at Camp David, when he declared that the White House must set the example for other agencies in staff reductions so "the biggest cuts will be made in the White House staff itself." From that moment on, staff reduction

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became a public-relations objective as well as an actual interim. Departures such as those of Commander Larzelere have been trumpeted as the "streamlining of the White House staff" rather than as the elimination of staff positions added by the Nixon administration.

It is almost impossible for a reporter to determine the actual size of the White House staff, either under President Nixon or his immediate predecessors. The Army sergeants who chauffeur the President's assistants, the archivists who prepare material for the Nixon library and the gardeners detailed by the National Park Service to manicure the White House grounds have never been considered part of the staff.

Under the Johnson administration the practice of using persons on the payrolls of other agencies as uncounted White House staff members became so widespread that fewer than half the people working at the White House were actually members of the staff. President Nixon proposed in 1970, "in the interest of candor and accuracy" to stop this practice and to count all these non-staff staffers—"detailees," in the language of the bureaucracy—as members of the White House staff. In return, he asked Congress to increase the presidential budget to pay for their salaries.

Congress, delighted that an accurate White House staff count finally seemed obtainable, approved the request. The Nixon administration put most of the "detailees" on the White House payroll. But it was never able to do so for all of them, for a variety of reasons. Some were foreign service officers who didn't want to give up their rankings. Some were political personnel, conveniently dispatched to the White House for special assignments. And in some cases, the administration, like its predecessors, simply found it more convenient to borrow an employed specialist from another agency than to hire one for the White House.

In any event, it is well known in the White House that people are on detail there from the Agriculture, Commerce, Transportation, State and Labor Departments, from the Action Agency and from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Any complete accounting by

the White House would reveal this. The White House, however, has yet to reveal the exact number of detailees and has been reluctant to talk about them—except when claiming detailees as part of the White House staff reductions.

On Jan. 26, Budget Director Roy Ash said at a White House briefing that staff numbers had been put on a "full disclosure basis." The briefing was actually a celebration by Ash and Ziegler of staff reductions that supposedly included a 32 per cent cutback in "non-career professional White House staff."

The statistic was supported by a November 1972 list of 147 White House staff members showing the number of persons who were returning to private life.

At least four persons on the list, handed out by Ziegler—Carlos Conde, Bonnie Bradbeer, Karen D. Jenkins and Michael B. Smith—and possibly many more—were detailed from other agencies and were included in the "32 per cent reduction" although they had not previously been counted as White House staff members.

At the White House briefing of Feb. 5—the same briefing where it was learned that Commander Larzelere was departing "as part of the reorganization and streamlining of the White House staff"—Ziegler also had some answers to questions on this point:

Q—Will it be possible to get the list of the people who are detailed to the White House staff?

A—In the course of the briefing we had the other day, we discussed the detailing.

Q—You said there were 10 or 11. I have reason to believe there are a number more and I wondered if it would be possible to get the (list of) the people detailed.

A—I can check that. I have reason to believe you are wrong.

Q—Well, the way to solve it would be to provide the list, wouldn't it?

A—That is right. The list has yet to be provided.