

Joseph Alsop

The New System

At the White House

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Since the return to the command post of Gen. Alexander Haig, the White House has resembled a military unit responding by the book to a disaster in the field. It calls to mind the U.S. Army's disaster on the Yalu River in 1950; the subsequent headlong retreat through half of Korea; and the way Gen. Matthew Ridgway then succeeded in forming strong new lines again.

The period of headlong retreat, caused by the Watergate horror, comprised the President's forced retirement of men very powerful and very close to him. But this initial retreat by no means improved the atmosphere in the White House. It was compounded by the weeping secretaries of the dismissed; the total demoralization of the junior staff; the grim seclusion of the President himself; and the murk of defeatism hanging over all.

The Yalu disaster was followed by similar disorder and defeatism. Gen. Douglas MacArthur even warned President Truman the U.S. Army would be thrown bodily out

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of Korea, unless he could be immediately given four more divisions—which he knew did not exist. That was the moment President Truman should have fired MacArthur. Instead, the President sent Ridgway, who did take job

MacArthur said could not be done. Unhappily, the MacArthur in the present case was President Nixon himself. Hence one cannot really know what he said or thought. But at least he sent for Haig.

The first results have been electrifying. Pre-Haig, the President had already transferred Elliot Richardson from the Defense Department to the Justice Department, where he will be far more at home. Post-Haig, the President has continued to make radical improvements in the whole character and posture of his administration.

The most obvious improvements have been the appointments of James Schlesinger at the Defense Department, and of William Colby to succeed Schlesinger at the CIA. Schlesinger specialized in strategic studies at the Rand Corporation. At the Budget Bureau, he handled the Pentagon appropriations—and handled them firmly, too. Between

the Budget Bureau and the CIA, came the Atomic Energy Commission. In sum, he is the best prepared Secretary of Defense in a good many years.

Colby, by the same token, is the hero of just about every professional in the intelligence community. His appointment is meant to say to all professionals in government that they are not going to be ridden over rough-shod, in the way formerly fashionable at the White House.

Yet the biggest gain, none the less, has been jettisoning the old system. Here, again, one thinks of the Korean War in 1950. MacArthur got into hideous trouble on the Yalu River because of the old system in his own headquarters—a ghastly system of sycophancy and self-serving that led naturally to MacArthur's ghastly error in judgment. In the same fashion, the old system in the Nixon White House led naturally to the Watergate

horror.

The existence of that system, if you think of it, has been the most serious Watergate disclosure. Behind the scenes in every administration since Herbert Hoover's, reprehensible things have always been done. But this time, it is now clear that there were two great differences.

On the one hand, singularly reprehensible things were done at the Watergate for no rational purpose whatever. No one, and least of all President Nixon, stood to gain by listening to former Democratic Chairman Lawrence O'Brien's telephone conversations. On the other hand, the former White House system all but automatically generated these pointless crimes.

It was a closed system, composed of persons heedless of the general opinion, self-righteously thinking themselves above the law, in love with power, and always using the seclusion of the President to perpetuate and increase their power. Being a closed system, it was also dangerous in all sorts of ways not connected with the Watergate horror. Hence the destruction of the old system is what chiefly puts the country in debt to the reporters who exposed Watergate.

To complete the Korean analogy, one question still remains. Since Haig went to the White House, the administration has been briskly staking out new positions and establishing new lines. But can these lines be defended, like the new lines Ridgway established?

One must wait and see. But Leonid Brezhnev evidently believes the lines will hold. The Soviet boss would not be coming here, one must remember, to see a doomed President.

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William Raspberry is on vacation. His column will resume next week.