

A cold shadow on the capital

One night at the White House, in the twilight of his power, Lyndon Johnson was playing the old country boy. He mused upon the two men who were contending for the office he had renounced.

"Humphrey has it here and here," he said, pointing first to his head and then putting his hand over his heart. "But I sometimes wonder if he has it here," he went on, touching his groin.

"Now, Nixon has it here," declared L.B.J., still pointing downward, "and he has it here," he said, tapping his skull. "But I sometimes wonder if he has it here." Johnson thumped his chest over his heart.

Time has not removed this doubt. A feeling of heartlessness does emerge from the White House. Justified or unjustified, it plays a major part in explaining why the Nixon leadership has not taken deeper root nationally. It is at the core of the failure of the Administration's assault on Democrats in this fall's campaign. It is an ingredient in the continuing troubles between the White House and the Congress. It clouds Nixon's relations with the press. It adds to the mounting internal strife and suspicion within the Administration's own ranks.

The latest manifestation was the graceless and unfeeling firing of six of Interior Secretary Walter Hickel's staff. There is nothing unusual in eliminating a fallen leader's personal followers. But this particular operation was executed by another of those third-string White House factotums, this one named Fred Malek, with a certain joyful brutality (clean out your desk before the end of the day) that makes one wonder whether it was done to improve the Administration or for the sheer pleasure of dispensing pain. The Hickel staff, after all, was not a Democratic creation but one of the Republicans' own. In any event, the rancor left in the department by the manner of the firing runs so deep that the new man, Rogers Morton, has al-

ready been warned by friends to brace for a period of suspicion, even hostility.

The malaise has emerged in other forms. Vice President Spiro Agnew's lack of sensitivity in his campaign against permissiveness turned a Middle American philosophical triumph into a time of doubt and misgiving. Unyielding, unbending, unforgiving, Agnew's (and Nixon's) fervor began to sound like Carry Nation's temperance crusade. In the end it turned into a kind of soulless howling very near to that of the New Left, the very villain Agnew was denouncing.

In Congress they complain about another sort of insensitivity. Phone calls from men on the Hill to the White House are not returned, despite the fact that the President has the biggest staff in history. During the election the Maryland Republican delegation protested the plan to run a series of sensationally unfair political ads against Senator Joseph Tydings, but their pleas were ignored. Texas Republican John Tower, a Nixon stalwart, complained bitterly the other day to Attorney General John Mitchell that former Texas Governor John Connally, a rip-snorting Democrat, got more White House social invitations than he did, and it made him look ridiculous back home.

"Politics," said Mr. Dooley, "ain't beanbag." Certainly men take a necessary pride at times in being hard, forthright, un sentimental. But perhaps there is a more practical virtue in attending to the small human rituals, the very thing that Nixon praised in his Inaugural Address. Sir Kenneth Clark, author of *Civilisation*, wrote: "I believe in courtesy, the ritual by which we avoid hurting other people's feelings by satisfying our own egos. . . . I am sure that human sympathy is more valuable than ideology."

In Nixon's cloistered world he personally pays sincere attention to the small courtesies. We know that. He feels deep and honest sympathy for the POWs and their bereft families. Even those exposed to his anger have sometimes come away with the odd impression that it is slightly artificial. After his meeting with Nixon last spring over the famous letter recommending that more attention be paid to students, Wally Hickel told his staff that it seemed as if Nixon "had been briefed to be unsympathetic" to the suggestion. Two weeks ago, when Hickel was fired, he came out marveling about the same sensation. It was almost as if Nixon were playing the role of tyrant on the instructions of his advisers.

For the most part, the men around Nixon, even in the administrative and political branches, are individually pleasant and alert. But something seems to happen when they come together. They form an engine of great efficiency and precision but no heart, maybe because so many of them lack any real authority or assurance. Power is so closely held in this Administration that these men on the outer perimeter of Nixon's personal defenses seldom dare to be responsive on their own. The cold shadow they cast over the nation seems to be Nixon's. Perhaps it really is.

