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Herbert Klein: The Man Behind Agnew's Attack

By ROBERT B. SEMPLE JR.
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WASHINGTON — Not long ago, Secretary of the In-

terior Walter J. Hickel, whose image is still suspect among conservationists, made a quick luncheon swing through the editorial offices of several major newspapers and magazines in the northeast. He created, by all accounts, a favorable impression, winning over a number of skeptics.

Nobody was more delighted by Hickel's success than the man who masterminded the tour — Herbert G. Klein, the President's director of communications.

Whether coordinating the government's information policies, distributing "fact sheets" on administration programs, seducing camera-shy Cabinet members into weekend television appearances, advising the President on his news conferences, or setting up "backgrounders" for Washington correspondents, the soft-spoken, 51-year-old Klein has firmly established himself as the Sol Hurok of the Nixon team. The refurbishing of Walter J. Hickel is only one of his triumphs.

KLEIN DIPPED from public view during the summer but in recent weeks he has resurfaced in dramatic fashion. He lent the weight of his office and his words to Vice President Agnew's denunciations of the media.

Klein's office distributes the Agnew speeches, and Klein himself publicly agreed with the thrust if not the tone of the vice president's remarks.

In addition, with the White House Press Secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, Klein arranged a series of "background" sessions in which key officials have sought to give the administration's version of Nixon's achievement in the last 11 months before reporters sit down to write their own versions of the same events.

THE BRIEFINGS ended today on a typically theatrical note. With newsmen looking on, Nixon, the vice president, the Cabinet and sub-cabinet gathered in the East Room for a high-level minstrel show to review the plusses and minuses, but mainly the plusses, of the year.

Given no precise mandate when he was named to the post a year ago, Klein performs a threefold function: He prods reluctant officials to release information, thus guarding Nixon's campaign pledge to conduct an "open administration;" he coordinates the flow of information from the departments; and, as a former editor himself, he acts as Nixon's envoy to the news media.

Answering the charge that he is merely a public relations man, Klein draws a distinction between two tasks. He says the task of applying cosmetics to the administration's performance is not his primary function. But the task of dispensing information and background material to give reporters a better chance to evaluate the administration's performance is, he says, his primary function.

TO MANY PEOPLE, how-

ever, it is a distinction without a difference, in the sense that the free flow of information is not inconsistent with good public relations.

The administration, for example, has made much of eliminating the "credibility gap," and so far no major chasms have appeared between what the administration had said and what it is in fact doing. But as Klein himself concedes, eliminating the credibility gap is itself precisely the sort of thing that one would expect a good public relations man to do.

Finally, despite all the ballyhoo about an open administration, and the admittedly broader accessibility of most senior officials of government, old-fashioned reportorial digging has not become an obsolete skill under the Klein dispensation. Much of the information he dispenses is readily available elsewhere.

CAPITAL OBSERVERS believe that within his definition of his role, Klein after many trials and a few errors has helped the public and, not incidentally, his commander-in-chief.

He has worked particularly hard, if anonymously, to merchandise important but complicated pieces of new legislation.