

The Casting-out of Wally Hickel

In the evening chill and dark last week Wally Hickel jogged through Washington's Kenwood section, breathing deep and feeling his boxer's muscles become taut as he threw off the day's nervous fatigue. When there was time he socked the speed bag in the gymnasium at the Interior Department and got out the rope and skipped until the perspiration stood out on his forehead.

But even this meticulous attention to the training habits he established 33 years ago as Golden Gloves champion of Kansas could not hide from his staff the edge of strain around his eyes, or disguise the nervous jump when telephones rang. In the misty postelection landscape of Washington, Hickel was fighting for his job as Secretary of Interior against an adversary he could not identify and for reasons which were not clear to him. Though the ritual was as old as politics, it was nevertheless brutal and exhausting.

Hickel's letter to Nixon last spring urging the President to listen to the youth who were protesting Cambodia had caused a stir of anger in the White House. It was a gesture of heart, not of disloyalty, Hickel believed. Afterward, in May, the Secretary went to the White House and sat down with Nixon for 45 minutes of friendly talk about problems old and new. At the end of the meeting Hickel came right out with it: Did the President want him to resign? Nixon stood up quickly and replied that that was an option which nobody had considered. Summoning White House

aides John Ehrlichman and Bryce Harlow, he left them to talk some more with Hickel. That storm seemed to have subsided.

But Hickel's life in the Nixon administration has been one storm after another. Maybe he failed to understand how upsetting his style was to the ordered, quiet lawyers and advertising men in the White House. While the nation cheered as he stopped the jetport in the Florida Everglades, blocked the chemical plant at Hilton Head, S.C., took Chevron Oil to court for spilling in the Gulf of Mexico, there were always those within the White House who didn't like it. Hickel would not believe that Nixon was among them. He never criticized the President.

But the White House kept emitting signals of unhappiness. The final decision to take part of Hickel's authority away by creating a separate Environmental Protection Agency was made without consulting him. His proposal for sewer service financing for hard-pressed communities received initial presidential backing but then died slowly as it passed along the bureaucratic corridors.

Wally Hickel believed in himself. "If I do a good job for 200 million people," he told one staffer, "I do a good job for the Republican party." But, a self-styled populist, Hickel stood apart from the other Nixon men. He was welcome on campus, he was the bird watchers' delight. He received hosannas from liberals, even from Democrats. In the mirthless and myopic ranks of the White House aides, however, Hickel smelled of disloyalty.

At a high-level meeting in August in San Clemente, Hickel banged the table with his fist and deplored the image he saw of an Administration withdrawing its help from the people. He urged emphasis on what had been done and what could be done, and the President backed him up in a 40-minute pep talk. As the meeting continued, Nixon passed Hickel a note asking to see him afterward. Bob Finch was with them when the President urged Hickel to go all out with his "Street Scene," a program aimed at closing central city streets to auto traffic during designated hours for pedestrian malls.

On September 10 he came back from an Arctic tour and wanted to report to Nixon. He wrote a letter asking for an appointment. On September 30 a letter came back from a third-string White House aide, Hugh Sloan, saying the President had asked the writer to tell the Secretary of Interior that an appointment would be "impossible."

Wally Hickel didn't like the tone of the recent political campaign in its latter stages. He

felt Vice President Agnew had accurately defined the national problems, but was overdoing it. Hickel said so to high party functionaries. They asked Hickel to fly to Houston and woo the oil men. He objected. Those votes were certain, why send him there? Let him go into the enemy camp, he said, let him talk to Catholics and walk with steel workers. He was told to go on to Houston and he did. But he called Finch and got permission to go to Youngstown too.

"We are going down," Hickel told a fellow Cabinet officer, "because we are talking to ourselves." He brooded about the campaign's negativism. "That's no way to win," he told one Republican. He still honored Richard Nixon. "The President's a kind man," he insisted one day when a visitor questioned Nixon's motives. "He lights up well." The President's antennae had been damaged by the people around him. Hickel, in his own view, was still a healer, a man trying to help the President. "He needs me," Hickel told a friend.

On election night he went to Spiro Agnew's Sheraton Park Hotel apartment to watch election returns with other Cabinet officers. Several of the men were appalled as Agnew excitedly paced back and forth in front of the TV set pointing and exclaiming over the news of the defeat of his targets. "We killed that son of a bitch. . . . We killed that son of a bitch." Agnew scarcely commented on his own party's victories or found any positive meanings in the election. Several people there said later that they felt like leaving, but it was only Hickel who did walk out.

After the election there was no direct contact from the White House. In background sessions with newsmen, Nixon staff members listed Hickel as the one Cabinet member who would surely be going. Then Attorney General John Mitchell came to see Hickel. Mitchell did not ask for Hickel's resignation but he implied that it would be a big help if Wally would just quietly resign. Hickel argued that he thought he was good for the Administration, that he did not want to go. But, he went on, "Whenever the President wants my resignation, I'll put on my hat and give it to him." John Mitchell's mood seemed to change. As he went out Hickel's door he said, "Wally, sit tight."

Hickel did. But last week the rumors grew more specific and more insistent, and then on Wednesday night, right around dusk, Nixon called him to the White House. The meeting between the two men, once friends and allies, took half an hour. Wally Hickel was out.

