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Watergate Frustrates

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The other day a second-echelon White House aide, a longtime loyal disciple and servant of President Nixon, sat in his office and talked with chagrin and some bewilderment about the Watergate case.

He felt the President needed help and advice in his latest crisis, and he had some ideas he wanted to convey to him. "But frankly," he said, "I wouldn't know how to get them to him right now."

What he was saying, of course, was that the one avenue of communication to the Oval Office in the Nixon administration has been across the desk of White House chief of staff H.R. Haldeman and under the circumstances that avenue was no longer useable.

In other conversations with old Nixon hands in and out of the White House in the last several days, this same desire to get through to the President has been heard, and with it the same sense of frustration of just how it can be done now.

"The result," one aide says, "is that in the end you don't do anything. You finally console yourself with the thought that there probably isn't anything you can suggest that the President hasn't thought of himself by now. So you just sit back and wait to see what happens."

It is the greatest of ironies that the insulation of the President, so carefully and tenaciously constructed over the last 4½ years to give him time to work and think, now cuts him off from those who most want to help him in his latest hour of tribulation.

They still perform the routine daily chores but

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with the distinct feeling that nothing is moving now.

The great preoccupation with Watergate and its ramifications hangs over everything that is said and done, eroding concentration and robbing sense of direction.

Haldeman and his Watergate troubles are not the only block to the conduct of constructive business. "You look around, and you see who else has been mentioned," one aide says. "If you have some business with him, and you're not particularly close to him personally, you're just as likely not to call him right now."

There are a few aides, like Leonard Garment, the old Nixon law partner, who have special responsibilities that do not fall into the structure, and hence are better able to continue business as usual. Garment, for instance, has been proceeding with work on legislation for a Legal Services Corporation and has been serving as a troubleshooter on the Indian uprising at Wounded Knee.

In the casting for new avenues to the President, more than one White House aide says now that Garment —a relatively free agent in the White House structure and an old and trusted Nixon friend—may be the best in-house conduit to the President.

Sources within the White House say he and Richard Moore, a special presidential counsel who formerly

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worked for John Mitchell at the Justice Department, have taken on special advisory functions for Mr. Nixon concerning the Watergate mess.

Garment and Moore, thus, may be the closest thing to a Watergate task force right now, in the opinion of some White House aides. But they acknowledge they are in a dark room, with not even shadows on the wall to read or misread.

Mr. Nixon's habit of withdrawal in times of crisis has become part of the man's unnerving mystique.

His friends like to characterize this withdrawal as a demonstration of supreme personal self-assurance and concentration, preparatory to the making of a major decision. His detractors call it weird conduct for a man who always has a wide pool of brainpower to call on.

The phenomenon of Mr. Nixon going to Key Biscayne last weekend without his palace guard of Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman raised eyebrows because of suspicions that they may have been implicated in Watergate. But even had they not been, it would have been characteristic for the President to have dug himself a private hole and climbed in.

The image of the nation's leader out on the presidential yacht Sequois by himself last week is the brooding stuff of which Charlton Heston movies are made, and it only serves to underline the sense of isolation that frustrates the White House staff these days.

In November, 1962, after his crushing defeat in the race for governor of California, Mr. Nixon faced a personal career crisis he has never written about. On that occasion, with an army of personal friends of great political experience to call upon, he chose instead to isolate himself at a hotel on Paradise Island in the Bahamas, with two of the most non-political men he knew.

John S. Davies, a California telephone sales manager who supervised the Nixon communications system in the 1962 campaign and had not known Mr. Nixon previously, was invited to accompany him. The two flew to Miami, where they picked up C.G. (Bebe) Rebozo, then and now Mr. Nixon's closest personal friend. "The three of us would go swimming in the surf, "Davies recounted later, "swapping stories, talking about anything. Then he would get deep in thought and would walk down the beach. We'd wait for him, and sooner or later he would come back."

Out of that vacation with the two conspiciously non-political men came Mr. Nixon's decision to move to New York, to make a new start that eventually put him back on the road to the White House. Those who know this story, and many others like it, know the President is again wrestling with a major delemma essentially alone.

Though these aides profess great confidence in the President to come out of his self-woven cocoon with the right answers, the silence and the wait are unnerving to them. It is only natural that many would like to give him their counsel—which overwhelmingly is to clean house and fast. But they know their man and are resigned to watch, listen and wait.