

Joseph Kraft

Kenneth Rush's Formidable Assignment

The White House is such a small place that the addition of any large figure to the staff can make a big difference. That is preeminently the case with Kenneth Rush, the former undersecretary of state who was sworn in the other day as counselor to the President on economic policy.

For by temperament and experience Mr. Rush is the polar opposite of the men who now dominate the White House staff. So if he is tough enough, if he is enough of an activist, he could change the tone at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—and not for the worse.

At present the dominant figures on the staff are Gen. Alexander Haig, Mr. Nixon's chief of staff, and Ron Ziegler, the spokesman who has been promoted to presidential assistant. Both have a narrow base of professional experience—Haig as a career army officer, Ziegler as an advertising man.

Both made their big jumps in life by showing their ability to take it. Haig was a punching bag for Henry Kissinger whom he served in the White House, and Ziegler was a punching bag for the press during the period he was the President's daily spokesman. Unquestioning personal loyalty to their particular boss—and a disposition toward confrontation when he is in trouble—comes naturally to both men. Haig could easily have uttered the remark made by Ziegler in discussing

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how to handle Watergate: "Contrition is bull."

Rush, by contrast, has a very broad background—lawyer, law professor (at Duke) and corporate executive (president of Union Carbide) before becoming ambassador to Germany and deputy secretary of Defense in the first Nixon administration. He is soft-spoken and courteous, and he prefers to proceed by conciliation rather than conflict. In a chat the other day, he called the present atmosphere of confrontation at the White House "most unfortunate."

To be sure, the title of the White House job suggests that Rush has a narrowly focused responsibility. Smart alecks who take titles (and themselves) seriously are already badmouthing him because of his lack of training as a professional economist. "If you've already decided there's nothing that can be done about the econ-

omy," one government official cracked the other day, "then Rush is the right economic coordinator."

In fact there are some things Rush can, and probably will, do in the economic field. He fully intends to hush up the war of words now being waged by Roy Ash, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, and William Simon, the Secretary of the Treasury.

The signs are that Rush is going to stand up against the wild, demagogic attacks which Secretary Simon—in the name of fighting inflation—has been making on the federal budget. One certain change is that Rush will now chair, and hold in his own office, the daily morning meetings of the economic policymakers which Mr. Simon has been chairing since the departure of George Shultz as economic coordinator.

Rush, moreover, does not regard the economic policy role narrowly. At his State Department office the other day, he pointed out that governments all over the democratic world—in Britain, France, Germany, Scandinavia and Japan—have been getting weaker. He said that "the main cause seems to be inflation."

The big question is Rush's relations with the President. He expects to have "ready access to the President at all times." He has talked this matter over with Mr. Nixon and with Gen. Haig. "There was never a question that it would be any other way," he says.

If that understanding prevails, Rush could make a big difference. He could ease the tension at the White House, and break the circle of isolation. Only to do it, he will have to make the most of his character. He will have to be an activist, trading on his friendship with the President to insert himself into Mr. Nixon's office for frequent chats. He will have to be prepared to serve as an usher from time to time—bringing outsiders in to see the President, despite the objections bound to come from the present palace guard.

It is a formidable assignment, and no one can be optimistic that Rush will succeed. If he did, a thoroughly decent man would have penetrated the inner sanctum of the Nixon White House and all of us would be better off.