

Weighs Renewed Drive on Critics

Nixon 'Attack Group' Back

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At 9:15 a.m. on most days throughout last fall, a small group of Nixon political strategists gathered in the office of White House special counsel Charles W. Colson to consider ways to deal with the President's campaign critics.

They called themselves "the 9:15 group" but soon became known as "the attack group" because of the nature of their task: to mount a propaganda offensive against the McGovern campaign, keeping it on the defensive.

The campaign is over now, but the criticism of the President continues — on his Fiscal 1974 budget cuts, on his hard-line position on postwar amnesty, even on the nature of his Vietnam truce settlement.

Accordingly, once again "the attack group" has be-



CHARLES W. COLSON
... leader leaving

gun to gather — not on a daily basis, not with any such clearly defined mandate as in the 1972 campaign, and with some of the old faces missing.

For the last few weeks,

and as recently as last Monday, some holdovers from the original group and some newcomers have been addressing themselves to basically the same task — considering ways to counter Mr. Nixon's critics.

The leader of the group in the 1972 campaign, Colson, is leaving the White House at the end of this month, but he is said to be involved in getting the meetings going again.

He is being replaced on the White House staff by William J. Barody Jr., chief aide to former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird. It is not known whether Barody will take over direction of the attack group as well.

Other regular members of the 1972 group were Kenneth W. Clawson, deputy director of the White House office of communications;

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in President Nixon's tough line last week on the war critics, on amnesty for Vietnam war draft evaders and on budget critics.

They also were reflected, this source said, in Colson's remarks on the public television network the night after Mr. Nixon's press conference. Colson charged that a Democratic "sellout brigade" had prolonged the Vietnam war and impeded peace negotiations with their vocal opposition to Mr. Nixon.

On the day of Mr. Nixon's press conference, Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) sent out a mailing quoting many of the critics of the war.

Tony Smith, Goldwater's press secretary, said yesterday there was no White House tie-in and that the quotes were compiled by the Goldwater staff. About 1,000 copies were printed and mailed out for the senator by the Republican National Committee.

In his "Vietnam White Paper," Goldwater said:

"The intellectual establishment—those whose writings entered America into the Vietnam war—pompously postured from their ivy hideaways, using their inordinate power to influence public opinion to malign the President..."

The principal members of the 9:15 or "attack" group recently received gold cufflinks inscribed "9:15" as a memento of their service on a little-publicized campaign unit that was highly regarded within the Nixon reelection operation.

A major function of the group not only was to spot McGovern's weak points and to recommend counters to attacks made on the President, but to ask specific surrogate candidates, including Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, to deliver the attacks and counter-attacks.

Although no decision has been made to form another stable of surrogates to go after the President's post-election critics, administration sources said, that step would be a logical one.

If a full-scale "battle of the budget" develops, one source said, "you can bet all resources will be used." And while there is no disposition on the part of the administration "to go out and attack our opponents, there has

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Wallace Johnson, a White House congressional liaison man; Patrick J. Buchanan, a Nixon speechwriter and compiler of the President's daily news summary; Edward Failor, special aide from the Committee for the Re-election of the President, and Albert E. Abrahams, the committee's public information chief.

Of these, Clawson, Johnson and Buchanan remain on the White House staff. Buchanan, according to White House sources, continues to sit sometimes with the reconstituted attack group, but Clawson denied there was such a group any more "that I know of." Johnson could not be reached for comment last night.

Other administrations, of course, have always sought to counter criticism, usually by trying to get their own positions to the public through speeches, congressional testimony and the like.

But this may be the first time a campaign propaganda apparatus has been carried over into post-election politics.

Research material has been prepared on Vietnam war critics who, the President said last week, seemed to derive "the least pleasure out of the peace agreement."

But White House sources said yesterday that no decision has been made by the attack group to organize what one called "an orchestrated program" against the Vietnam doves. "That question was the major topic last week," one source said, "but it's in limbo now."

According to another administration source, sentiments of the group were clearly reflected, however,

never been a disposition here, either, that if we're under attack, to turn the other cheek."

As for the Vietnam truce critics, this source said, "it is not realistic that we're going to let people vomit all over the peace while we just sit by."

The possibility that selected Republican leaders might be asked, as they were in the campaign, to carry the fight to the opposition in Mr. Nixon's defense raises some politically interesting speculation about the role Vice President Agnew might play.

In Miami Beach last August, after his renomination, Agnew said he was not "unhappy" at having been assigned the job of "cutting edge" in the first Nixon administration but "it's a lot more comfortable not to be the cutting edge."

Privately, the Vice President has told friends he resented being asked to say things in the 1970 campaign that brought him personal ridicule, and would be more selective in the future in what he said. By and large, his attacks on the political opposition were more tempered in 1972.

As a leading, if not the leading, candidate for the 1976 Republican presidential

nomination, presumably it would be sensible for Agnew to maintain a low profile and to avoid sharp controversy. Indeed, President Nixon gave that advice to potential 1976 candidates last week in a short lecture on how to be nominated.

But if the battle against the Nixon critic should become an all-out campaign, at the President's direction as it would have to be, it would be difficult for Agnew to decline to stand in the front ranks.

"It would depend on who asks him," one administration source said—meaning Mr. Nixon himself.