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The Firing of Alexander Butterfield

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Alexander Butterfield, whose revelation of Richard Nixon's secret White House taping system ultimately cracked the Watergate cover-up, is being pushed out—with considerable reluctance on his part—as federal aviation administrator.

On the Friday before Christmas, Butterfield was summoned to the office of his superior, James Secrest, secretary of Transportation Claude Brinegar. Brinegar informed Butterfield he was through as head of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Butterfield shot back that he was a presidential appointee who could be fired only by the President. But it soon became clear that Brinegar was acting as President Ford's agent.

A high-level White House aide informed us that Butterfield's imminent departure is merely part of the gradual replacement of Nixon men by Ford men. But that raises this inevitable question: why should Mr. Ford retain Cabinet members blindly loyal to Nixon until the bitter end while firing Butterfield, a hero of Watergate in forthrightly revealing the existence of the secret White House tapes?

The answer by one high Transportation Department official is that the White House has wanted to get rid of Butterfield ever since "he blew the whistle on Nixon" but could not until, first, Nixon was gone and, second, there was some excuse for it. The excuse arrived Dec. 1 when a TWA Boeing 727 crashed outside Washington because the FAA had not required a safety device.

"Why should Mr. Ford retain Cabinet members blindly loyal to Nixon until the bitter end, while firing Butterfield, a hero of Watergate?"

One presidential aide snapped, "That's ridiculous," to suggestions that Butterfield's sacking might be long distance retribution for his Watergate role. Whatever the reason, the decision came from the White House. Although relations between Brinegar and Butterfield were stormy and they barely spoke at times, Brinegar—his resignation effective on Feb. 1—could not have acted on his own.

A footnote: Brinegar's resignation, beginning the long overdue clean-up of the old Nixon Cabinet with its announcement Dec. 18, was forced rather than voluntary. He has grumbled privately that the request for him to quit came not from Mr. Ford but from White House Chief of Staff Donald Runnfeldt.

Dissimilar though they are, Gerald R. Ford has one trait in common with Lyndon B. Johnson: he watches television and sometimes reacts instantly to what he sees.

Richard M. Nixon took out the triple-screen television installed by Johnson in the Oval Office, and aides have claimed that President Ford does not watch television news programs. But he certainly was watching the

evening of Nov. 29 when Martin Agronsky's nightly program over Eastern Educational TV discussed the SALT II agreement.

Richard N. Perle, a national security aide to Sen. Henry M. Jackson, criticized the Vladivostok agreement and concluded that "the next time he (Mr. Ford) would be more careful with foreigners who drink vodka." That produced laughter at the television studio. But Mr. Ford, listening at home in the White House, was not the least amused.

Nixon as President might quietly put Perle down on a mental "enemies" list. But Mr. Ford, like LBJ would have, reached for the telephone and called Jackson. His aide, the irate President informed the senator, had accused him of drinking vodka with foreigners in a paraphrase of Rep. Willbur Mills' explanation of the Tidal Basin incident.

After obtaining a transcript, Jackson informed the President that was not quite what Perle said and succeeded in mollifying him. But the incident showed some fire behind the bland facade of Jerry Ford.

When labor political operative Al

Barakan was in Boston the night of Dec. 20 to be named man of the year by a local union, he received a telegram from his boss—AFL-CIO President George Meany—intended as a signal for the whole labor movement.

"In my book, Al Barakan has done a magnificent job in constantly building and strengthening labor's political arm," said Meany adding that the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE) under Barakan "is far and away the best political operation in America."

That was intended to smother speculation that Barakan, under fire from the reform wing of the labor movement, was about to be fired as COPE director—a report that swept the floor of the recent Kansas City convention. Barakan's friends blamed his arch-enemy, President Jerry Wurf of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), for starting the rumor at Kansas City.

Barakan did not have to wait till Dec. 20 for reassurance. Upon his return to Washington from Kansas City, Barakan was informed by AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Lane Kirkland that he had been assured of keeping his job as long as he wanted it because of the enemies he made at Kansas City in his unsuccessful fight for outright restrictions against racial quotas. That means an indefinite continuation of the struggle for labor political power between old guard and leftist unions.