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Restaffing the White House

The President's latest set of appointments makes a liar of the vicious charge that those trying to get at the truth about Watergate are undermining the national interest. By themselves, the new men at the Justice Department, and particularly General Alexander Haig who goes to the White House, improve the efficacy of government many times over.

Still further improvements are easy to make if Mr. Nixon finally begins to take to heart the true lesson of Watergate. The lesson is that Presidency is not a word spelled with a capital N.

The most striking improvement has come at the Federal Bureau of Investigation. L. Patrick Gray, the acting director forced out by Watergate, was far too starry-eyed about the President to be a good leader. His confession that he destroyed documents relevant to the Watergate inquiry on the instruction of White House aides is a sign of how far he was prepared to go in making the FBI into a private police force for Mr. Nixon.

By contrast, William Ruckelshaus, who is now acting director, is a paragon of brains and independence. One gutsy act alone—the stationing of FBI men in the White House offices of Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman to prevent them from doctoring their records—demonstrates the firmness of Mr. Ruckelshaus' conviction that the arm of the law does not wither at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

The change in the office of Attorney General registers almost as dramatic an advance. Richard Kleindienst, who has stepped down, seemed to me far more principled than generally recognized on such matters as civil rights and civil liberties. But he was so much of a hip-shooter, so disposed to sign documents without reading them, so

impulsive in his judgments, that his principles rarely came into effective play.

Elliot Richardson, who leaves Defense to go to Justice, has recently shown a distinct willingness to compromise principle in the interest of personal ambition. But Mr. Richardson has always been master of his brief, and he has compromised only at the margin. He will set high standards for the Justice Department, and his weakness for giving sacred ground to the President will almost surely be stiffened by the intense public scrutiny bound to focus on anything he does relating to Watergate. That much has

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already been proved by the decision to appoint a special Watergate prosecutor.

Probably the most hopeful change comes at the White House, where Gen. Haig replaces Haldeman as chief of staff. To be sure General Haig is an ambitious Army man on his way to becoming a very young chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

If he stayed long in the Haldeman job he would become the lobby for the military side of the Pentagon. Inevitably he would be drawn into rivalry with his former boss, Henry Kissinger, who is already beginning to experience

much more competition in the field of national security. On top of all that a country which turns to an active general when in trouble, truly does give the banana republic impression.

But General Haig knows all that. His interest is to come to the White House for a short but drastic clean-up, and then return to the Pentagon.

For that purpose he is the ideal man. He is direct, forceful and free of hang-ups. He is not paranoiac about the Congress or the liberal Democrats. From observations at the headquarters of General MacArthur, he knows how much damage an over-zealous staff can do a reclusive leader.

It would be very surprising if General Haig left intact the White House myth-making factory that has grown up under Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler and the deputy for communications, Kenneth Clawson. It would also be surprising if General Haig let stand the fix-it-for-business office which has grown up around another Assistant to the President, Peter Flanigan.

The big unknown in all this is the outlook of President Nixon. Various comments—including his promise of tighter legislation—make it sound as though Mr. Nixon thinks Watergate is just one more story of political corruption.

In fact, what is involved is the use of previously inviolate institutions of law enforcement and security for personal political goals. The right guarantee against that danger is not new laws. It is the appointment of sturdy and independent men animated by more than blind personal loyalty, to the top posts around the Presidency. Such men exist in abundance. The cure for Watergate, in other words, is at hand. But can Mr. Nixon take the medicine?