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Kenneth Rush: Giving Gen. Haig a Hand

Behind President Nixon's S.O.S. to Under Secretary of State Kenneth Rush lies far more than the search for a White House economic coordinator, the role originally planned for him and for which businessman-lawyer Rush seems only marginally suited.

Rather, Mr. Nixon's decision to bring the 64-year-old Rush, his one-time law-school professor, into the beleaguered White House was dictated by worsening policy feuds within the President's official family and the continuing erosion of White House influence over the vast federal bureaucracy.

Mr. Nixon, in short, has awakened to a fact long understood by most of his top officials and the Republican leaders in Congress: that White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig is now staggering under his remorseless work load and must have help.

Thus, Rush's real mission will be to moderate and soothe the policy clashes between such ambitious satraps as Roy Ash, head of the powerful Office of Management and Budget, Secretary of the Treasury William Simon and Domestic Council Chief Kenneth Cole.

Work relief for Haig has now become vital for Mr. Nixon's White House. When he first agreed to take over as chief of staff from ousted H. R. Haldeman, Haig was promised complete insulation from Watergate. That

pledge barely survived the drying of the ink on his presidential commission.

As a result, Haig soon found himself immersed in tortuous backroom strategy sessions over how Mr. Nixon should handle the enveloping Watergate and impeachment disasters and also charged with top-level responsibility in dealing with day-to-day operations of the government. That meant decision-making of a profoundly difficult character: deciding, for example, whether Ash or Simon should run the government's energy policy.

One result: An atmosphere of perpetual haste and frenzy in the office of the usually unflappable Haig which led him to actually telephone Newsweek magazine late on Sunday night, May 19, to seek revisions in a story on Haig that was already locked in type. In a more normal time, Haig would not have considered such an intrusion.

A major part of Rush's new White House job will be to take over much of Haig's role in trying to coordinate domestic policy and keep the federal government from flying apart under the pressures of impeachment politics.

Rush is not exactly rushing in to help his one-time law student. Just before Christmas last year, a White House press release had actually drafted announcing that Rush was leaving the State Department for the top White House Watergate strategy



Kenneth Rush

role. In preparation for that unenviable job, Rush immersed himself in the most crucial Watergate tapes and concluded that Mr. Nixon was innocent of the Watergate cover-up charges.

But that switch to the White House was canceled at literally the last minute by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who insisted that Rush stay at State for at least a few more months.

Now, the crisis over the White House staff leaves no option, as both the President and Rush perceive it. Mr. Nixon's two top domestic aides in the post-Watergate White House, Melvin Laird and Bryce Harlow, have both quit. Dean Burch, signed on as the newest top-level White House hand last February, is in an ambiguous role—ostensibly working with the regulatory agencies but in fact being used more as a political point-man with Republican congressmen and party officials.

In short, ever since the departure of Laird and Harlow, their work loads have been heaped on the sagging shoulders of the sleepless Haig, with Ash and Cole, both armed with ambitious staffs of their own, competing against each other and the Cabinet department for a larger slice of power.

For Rush, the new role as White House moderator is not an enviable one. As one experienced White House servant told us: "Ken may be a soft touch for the kind of brutalities going on in this town today." But there are two things that set him apart from some others who have tried to help Richard Nixon in his extremity: a conviction of the President's innocence and an almost familial intimacy which will guarantee him access to one of the loneliest of men.