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Washington Merry-Go-Round by JACK ANDERSON



WASHINGTON — President Ford discovered when he moved into the White House—that ex-President Nixon's staff chief, Gen. Alexander Haig, was functioning as the "acting President."

This characterization of Haig has been given by sources totally familiar with the White House operations during Nixon's final months. The harassed former President had become so obsessed with his Watergate woes, they say, that he left Haig in charge of running the country.

To his credit, the able, articulate Haig held the government together as the Watergate nightmare slowly stifled the oval office. The only exception: He left foreign affairs in the hands of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

We have now established beyond doubt that Nixon spent almost his full time brooding over his Watergate predicament and scheming with a few trusted advisers how to get out of it. "He was like a man groping through a poisonous fog," said one source.

Haig handled the presidential powers, which were thrust upon him, wisely and well, our sources agree. He was acutely conscious of his military background and tried to take a civilian's view of the nation's problems, they say.

He has tried quietly to relinquish his tremendous powers, according to our sources, since President Ford took over. But the White House staff is so conditioned to taking orders from Haig that he still wields more authority inside the White House than Ford's top aides.

This is one reason the President would like to ease Haig out. But it has been a problem finding an appropriate assignment for the man who behind the scenes has been exercising the powers of the President.

Footnote: General Haig refused comment.

WATCH ON WASTE: As part of our watch on waste, we have uncovered another Ernest Fitzgerald in the National

Institute of Education, which dishes out government millions for educational research.

Fitzgerald was the cost analyst who was fired by the Air Force for blowing the whistle on cost overruns.

Now the NIE has fired a \$21,300-a-year contract specialist under similar circumstances. This latest Ernest Fitzgerald is Robert Drucker.

The NIE claims Drucker was fired for failing to do his job. But on close examination, it looks suspiciously like it was his zeal to save money for the taxpayers that got him in trouble.

The \$8 million contract went to Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory of Portland, Ore., on a noncompetitive, favored-source basis. As the negotiations reached a climax, Northwest's Dr. Larry Fish flew to Washington to complain about the low fees.

He took his complaint among others to Marc Tucker, a power at NIE, who previously had worked under Fish at Northwest. Tucker immediately ushered his former boss into Drucker's office and suggested pointedly: "It seems to me you guys should sit down together."

In the language of the Washington Bureaucracy, when a bigwig says this to an underling, it means "strike a deal." But Drucker refused to allow Northwest more than a 4½ per cent fee, which still gave the lab a whopping \$360,000 profit.

Drucker also held the line in other negotiations. Suddenly, his performance ratings, which had always been high, began to plummet. A few days ago, he was fired.

Drucker has also complained about a \$6 million grant in 1969 to Far West Laboratory for Educational Research in San Francisco. The lab bought a huge old warehouse with the money but occupies only three floors. The other three floors are going to waste.

He has objected, too, to a \$4 million deal with Southwest Educational Development Laboratory of Austin, Texas. He questions a \$230,000 developer's fee and a \$300,000 prepaid rental.

Both Tucker and Fish insist that their friendship had nothing to do with the awarding of the \$8 million contract. All the dealings with NIE, they swear, have been totally proper. The NIE also contends there is no evidence of wrongdoing and, in an unusual move, has taken the initiative to invite the General Accounting Office to investigate.

HUNTING GRIZZLIES: The

powerful grizzly bear, which once roamed in great numbers through the West, is now threatened with extinction below the Canadian border.

This is the main conclusion of an unpublished Interior Dept. report which warns that the animal may be endangered unless immediate steps are taken to protect it.

To save the grizzly, the report urgently recommends that "sport hunting be temporarily banned" in Yellowstone Ecosystem of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana.

Conservationists estimate that only about 900 of these magnificent carnivores still survive in the lower 48 states. Yet the state of Montana, where the largest population of grizzlies exists, issued 919 grizzly permits for this year's hunting season.

If only a small number of these hunters are successful, the entire species could be nearly wiped out in the area. Yet Montana has refused to close down its season, and the U.S. Forest Service has refused to take action.