

'Signal' on Watergate?

The fact that H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, President Nixon's White House staff chief, went unannounced to Capitol Hill on March 28 and told a score of Republican congressmen that he knows nothing whatever about the Watergate scandal may signal a long-overdue change in the White House Watergate game of unconcerned aloofness.

If so, the change will be praised by Republican politicians. The Republican Party is in a growing mood of independence from the White House on the Watergate and attendant scandals, with minimum concern about political damage to President Nixon and maximum concern about its own skin.

Thus, the mere fact that the normally unapproachable Haldeman, heretofore remote from such mere mortals as Republican congressmen, decided to venture into the chilly climate of the Capitol may be far more revealing of the inner Watergate fears now besetting the White House than the public pronouncements of Ron Ziegler, Mr. Nixon's press secretary.

The invitation to Haldeman from Rep. Howard W. Robison of New York, chairman of the liberal-leaning band of Republicans called the "Wednesday Group," went to the White House in January. It was accepted suddenly one week in advance of Haldeman's 5 p.m. appearance on March 28.

White House aides, who have been pushing a new policy of exposing key presidential assistants like Haldeman to informal congressional panels, say

that the Watergate scandal had nothing to do with Haldeman's appearance. Perhaps. But some of those present during Haldeman's session with the Wednesday Group sensed that Watergate was one reason the haughty Haldeman was extending a new hand of friendship.

The congressmen learned nothing new about Watergate. As some of those present were starting to leave shortly before 6:30 that Wednesday evening, Haldeman was asked bluntly what he knew about it. In 10 minutes' worth of reply, he said that it was difficult to deny something "that you aren't accused of" (presumably meaning that he himself has not been specifically accused of complicity in the Watergate break-in and bugging). He said even his wife has asked him about "secret funds" but that he never had a "secret fund."

The meeting broke up with some of those present feeling that, although Haldeman's appearance had been extremely welcome, far more was needed to end the dangerous split which is putting the White House on one side of the Watergate scandal and the rest of the Republican Party on the other.

In short, Republican congressmen who have to run for re-election in 1974 are thinking not about loyalty to their President in the enveloping scandal of the 1972 campaign but about their own political skins.

As one key conservative Republican senator told us: "The only way for the Republican Party to keep from getting badly hurt is for us to dig it all out."

That feeling, indeed, seems finally to be getting through to the White House.

There are indications, for example, that White House counsel John W. Dean III has now forcefully proposed to Mr. Nixon that he and other White House aides who have been charged with complicity in Watergate should be permitted to testify before the Senate select committee headed by Sen. Sam Ervin Jr., of North Carolina.

Dean's rationale: The President's claim of executive privilege, a claim ridiculed by leading legal scholars as going far beyond the reach of the Constitution, is making Mr. Nixon look as though he is afraid to have his White House aides testify because he has so much to conceal.

The political ramifications of Watergate can't yet be measured, but they can be sensed. Thus, Republican politicians and fat cats in California two months ago were giving serious thought to the possible candidacy of Jeb Stuart Magruder, former White House aide and deputy head of the Committee for the Re-election of the President, for California secretary of state. Magruder went to California with a "white paper" outlining his qualifications and going to great length to declare his innocence of any wrongdoing in the Watergate scandal.

Today those same politicians and fat cats "wouldn't touch Magruder with a 10-foot pole," to quote one of them.

That's only the leading edge of the political storm being kicked up by Watergate. The more the storm grows, the wider will become the breach between the President and the rest of his party.