

Haldeman's Role Viewed As Reduced by Watergate

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WASHINGTON, April 25—H. R. Haldeman, who once ran the Nixon White House with stern efficiency, appeared today to have lost much of his power as reports mounted that a shake-up in the staff, including resignations, was being planned.

Mr. Haldeman has been reported to be under investigation by the grand jury looking into the burglary and bugging of Democratic headquarters in the Watergate building last summer and in alleged attempts to protect some who might have played a role in the crime. He has hired a lawyer to defend him in the case.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, disclosed under questioning that the regular morning meetings of top aides that Mr. Haldeman had conducted for more than four years were broken off about three weeks ago and had not been resumed.

Mr. Ziegler denied that this development had been connected with the Watergate case.

He said that the aides involved—Henry A. Kissinger, George P. Shultz, John D. Ehrlichman, Roy L. Ash and others—felt that their time could be better spent in meetings with their subordinates.

Other sources, however, pointed out that the breakoff of what had become an institution at the White House, with Mr. Haldeman in charge, coincided with the more recent explosive developments in the Watergate case and indicated strongly that Watergate was involved.

There was no clear indication today as to when staff changes might be forthcoming, but there were continuing reports from White House sources that there would be major changes.

As chief of staff and the man who regulated the flow of people and information into the President's office, Mr. Haldeman had long been considered the second most influential man

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in the White House.

There were other indications that Mr. Haldeman's power was rapidly declining.

President Nixon, in his handling of the Watergate case recently, has been turning not to Mr. Haldeman but to Leonard Garment, special consultant to the President, who has dealt with minority matters and special projects but who was not in the first rank of White House aides.

Role as Counsel Reported

Mr. Garment, according to White House sources, has been acting as Mr. Nixon's counsel and adviser in the Watergate matter during the last few days.

Another aide who has entered the picture as enjoying Mr. Nixon's confidence in the Watergate matter during the last few days is Patrick J. Buchanan, special consultant to the President, who spent a day and a half with Mr. Nixon in Key Biscayne last weekend. Mr. Haldeman, for the first time anyone could remember, did not make the trip.

Mr. Nixon thus seemed to be

turning for advice to some of his earlier, pre-Presidential supporters who have not been implicated in the Watergate affair.

The case has so shaken the White House staff that it was not clear, even to some on the inside, how the lines of authority have been changed. Mr. Ziegler worked closely with the President during his Florida weekend on matters not related to his duties as press secretary. He said this was because he was the only senior White House aide to have made the trip.

Shake-Up Viewed as Possible

"There is no change in the status of the White House staff," he said today. But when he was asked if some staff members had undergone a "change in functions," he would only say, "I am not prepared to break down what I said." He left open the possibility of an imminent staff shake-up.

There have been reports that former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird would be asked to rebuild the White House staff. In Marshfield, Wis., where

Mr. Laird was visiting his ill mother today, he said that he had been drafted four years ago to help take the United States out of Vietnam and build a voluntary Army and "I cannot be drafted again."

However, Wisconsin Republican leaders close to Mr. Laird said that they believed he could be persuaded to return to Washington for special duty if the President asked him.

Meantime, reports from the White House indicated that the President was spending most of his time on the Watergate case and had become the chief investigator of the case.

"He is very much concentrating on this matter," Mr. Ziegler said. He has assigned White House assistants to do investigative work; he has been conferring regularly with Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen, who is in charge of prosecuting the case; he has met with John Wilson, a lawyer hired by Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman. Mr. Wilson visited the White House for the second straight day this morning.

Mr. Ziegler would not answer

questions as to whether the President, by overseeing the Watergate investigation, might be influencing the outcome of the case and why he had not gone outside the Government to obtain a special prosecutor.