

Haldeman: Will He Stay On?

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Operating in a brooding, tomblike White House where presidential aides fear to speak out loud in the White House mess about the spreading ramifications of Watergate, President Nixon has now reached a key decision, the effect of which is to reject most of the advice pouring in on him from his few old and trusted friends.

The decision: Not to fire White House staff chief H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and not to attempt the grand overhaul of the White House staff which most leaders of his party insist on if there is to be any restoration of confidence.

Mr. Nixon, according to one of the very few intimates who enjoy his trust today, has thus decided, as of now, to ride out the storm as best he can with Haldeman still at his side.

If Haldeman is indicted by the Watergate grand jury, this presidential decision will obviously not survive. Mr. Nixon has said that any aide indicted would be suspended and any aide convicted would be fired.

But quite apart from the possible indictment or conviction of tough, crew-cut staff boss Haldeman, Mr. Nixon's tentative decision to keep him as top presidential aide is certain to multiply Republican Party wrath over the mushy way in which Mr. Nixon has dealt with the Watergate crisis thus far.

For it has long been a well-established political fact in Mr. Nixon's

Washington that Haldeman, more than any other White House aide, is the symbol of everything that Republican politicians loathe about the President's secretive, autocratic, suspicious and politically ignorant inner staff.

Precisely for that reason, the President has been strongly advised by old friends (whom he has been consulting nonstop since he went to Key Biscayne last week) that any post-Watergate fresh start must begin with a cleaning-out of his White House staff, with Haldeman the first to go.

One wise purveyor of just such advice has been Secretary of State William P. Rogers, the suave old pal who helped Mr. Nixon through some of his other self-styled "crises." Rogers has argued for a thorough housecleaning, not just to satisfy the immediate legal and political requirements of Watergate but to attempt a long-overdue change in bitter antagonisms of Republican congressmen toward the White House.

Similar advice has come to the President from trusted Manhattan lawyers to whom he occasionally turns for counsel, and from Robert Finch, an intimate political colleague who predates the Nixon-Haldeman relationship. Finch was driven out of the first Nixon administration partly by Haldeman himself.

Moreover, Mr. Nixon is beginning to learn that his White House staff, particularly Haldeman and the network of

eager Haldeman men in and beyond the White House, are feared and hated throughout the federal bureaucracy for the same reasons they are loathed on Capitol Hill: dictatorial decisions, lack of comprehension about the rudiments of good politics, and contempt for everyone else.

In short, the rising Republican anger at Haldeman — though still on the level of private communications — is directed against the very excesses inside the White House that permitted Watergate to be conceived and directed in the first place.

Why, then, has Mr. Nixon tentatively decided to hang on to Haldeman? The answer may lie in the failure to find a substitute such as Melvin R. Laird or John B. Connally, neither of whom would take the top White House job. Possibly the answer is to be found in the President's notorious resistance to any avoidable staff change.

There is one other hypothesis: that Mr. Nixon is planning a secret, wholly unexpected strategy in dealing with Watergate, a strategy of counterattack in which Haldeman's continued presence by his side is necessary.

The real answer is concealed in the silent, brooding White House, with many other still unanswered questions. It will probably stay concealed until Mr. Nixon gives his own version of Watergate to the American people, now planned for next week.