

ALREADY IT HAS A misnomer—the Sunday Night Massacre—and already the politicians and pundits have invested the President's shakeup of his administration with a superabundance of (often-conflicting) significance. But experience warns us that this kind of instant score-keeping on who's up and who's down in government, and what this means for future policy, is a mug's game requiring more reliable insights than even the most astute Washington-watchers have now. For now, it seems to us enough to ask a few elementary questions: Why not? Why now? And why in such an abrupt and clumsy manner?

The question of "why not" is the easiest. Mr. Ford, after all, did not appoint Secretary Schlesinger or CIA Director Colby to their jobs; nor did he give Henry Kissinger two of the top national security jobs in government. He is certainly entitled to rearrange the policy-making process, and to try to install in such critical posts people he would prefer to work with. To have done so, after 14 months of working with the national security team he inherited from President Nixon, is in itself hardly a "massacre."

To acknowledge the prerogative is not of course to pronounce on whether these were politically or substantively wise moves. It makes sense to us, for example, to split up Mr. Kissinger's two jobs; the point of the White House post was always to try to insure that the President be exposed to all sides of the arguments from all departments concerned with national security affairs. But with his hand-picked deputy taking over the White House position, and without the counterweight of Secretary Schlesinger to worry about, it remains to be seen whether the Kissinger hegemony will in fact be weakened. Likewise, it is possible to wonder whether this was the moment to dismiss both Mr. Schlesinger and Mr. Colby.

Which brings us to the question of "why now?" In terms of both politics and policy, for instance, it can be argued that the removal of Mr. Schlesinger at this moment sends all the wrong signals from Mr. Ford's point of view to everyone from the Republican right wing to the Soviet military to the members of Congress currently chewing over his defense budget.

In the case of Mr. Colby, he was himself among those who assumed he would leave his post when he had

completed the painful but necessary exercise going forward on the Hill: an effort to explain, purge, and in the process, pave a way for the rehabilitation of the CIA. He was engaged in a witting and honorable act of self-sacrifice which was price enough, it seems to us, for him to pay, without being unceremoniously and abruptly dumped.

To give the President the best of it, he cannot have been unaware of these problems of timing. So there must have been other pressures at work and here, let us admit, we are operating somewhat in the dark. But it is our best guess that the decision of Vice President Rockefeller to withdraw as a candidate, whatever its precise relation to the job changes, has this in common with the President's other moves: it is all part of a general refurbishing of the presidential image with Ronald Reagan, the early primaries, and the 1976 election all more or less clearly in mind.

We note, without surprise, that this was not the way the President presented it in an accounting of his actions that was as pedestrian as it was implausible. The men who were falling away had done really super work but they were not "my guys" (we had rather thought Mr. Rockefeller was, and that Mr. Kissinger, in fact, was not, but never mind). The point, it seems to us, is that the President was trying to will or wish away problems and conflicts he has been unable to cope with or resolve. The effect of this inability has been to present the unfortunate image of a weak caretaker, presiding over a divided and unruly government, with a domineering Secretary of State, an openly dissenting Vice President and Defense Secretary, and a CIA Director whose compulsion to come clean was above and beyond the call of a supposedly open administration. Now, it is true that the image-polishing might have been a little more successful if the whole complicated story hadn't leaked out in dribs and drabs enhancing the awkwardness and the crudeness, upsetting a careful timetable which might have invested the whole maneuver with a greater appearance of logic and control. But even the most exquisitely programmed presentation could not have disguised the rock-bottom irony of the situation. For the President with this drastic and summary treatment of his problem managed to confirm both the degree of disarray that he had allowed to set in and his own inability to deal with it except by the most abrupt and heavy-handed means.