

The Nixon-Hickel Affair

WASHINGTON

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Nov. 26—Among the minor tragedies in Washington in the last generation has been the triumph of good manners over honest conviction. When Presidents and their Cabinet members and White House staffers have differed since the last world war, they have tended to conceal their differences from the public and even from one another, thus creating an atmosphere of false unity, which was bad for everybody concerned.

Seldom in these last 25 years has anybody quit or been fired openly on principle. Many have "retired for personal reasons." Many more have slipped away with their "Dear Walter" letters expressing the eternal gratitude of the President for their faithful service to the great Republic. It was all very polite, but also all very phony.

President Nixon and Secretary of the Interior Hickel have done better, not much but some. They have parted with a bang. Mr. Hickel differed with the President's polarizing politics. He insisted on being fired personally by the President, and Mr. Nixon accommodated him which is fair enough.

It is hard to define where a Cabinet member's convictions should take precedence over his loyalty to the President, and harder still to say when he is justified in taking his differences with the President to the public, but it is fairly easy to explain the problem.

Cabinet members, in the United States, are the personal choices and even creations of the President. Outside of men like Secretary of Defense Laird, they do not represent powerful political constituencies in the nation, and there is actually no "cabinet" in the British sense of a group of men sharing collective leadership and assuming collective responsibility for the major actions of the nation.

Accordingly, American Cabinet members have come to be regarded merely as advisers and even servants of the President, who has the power and even the right to determine policy, even if all of them disagree with him. This is the way it has been ever since the days of Mr. Lincoln, who once dramatized the point by saying: Eight noes again my aye—the ayes have it.

Still, this creates problems. Cabinet members like Hickel or George Romney come from states where they were governors with the power of executive decision. They are introduced on television by the President as men of individual judgment, and then they usually disappear into their vast executive departments in Washington, with little sense of common responsibility for the major decisions of the Government, and actually with remarkably little personal contact with the President.

Most of them adjust to this. They

get lost in their departmental responsibilities, console themselves with the trappings of their offices, and accept the popular Cabinet and White House staff cliché: "I have only one client—the President."

It is an understandable attitude. They recognize that the President is both Chief Executive of the nation and leader of a political party, and that often these two jobs lead to fundamental contradictions. They sympathize with his struggles to cut back the nation's overseas commitments without stumbling into isolation; to fight inflation without slipping into an economic depression; to restore civil order without destroying civil liberties—so usually they swallow their doubts and remain silent, especially if the President does not really encourage dissent, and most of them don't while pretending that they do.

There are however great dangers in this system. A Cabinet post is not a marriage. The present system comforts the President but frustrates the boldest and often the most creative members of his Cabinet and White House staff. It often denies the President the hard but essential challenge of thoughtful minds, and, even though he may not intend it, intimidates his colleagues into silence or provokes them into public protest.

At least in Hickel's case the truth came out, and the Republic will probably survive his departure, for after all he was dissenting mainly against the President's political tactics. It is much more serious, however, when men like John Gardner and Robert McNamara differ, as they did with President Johnson, on fundamental questions of policy, including the tactics of peace and war, but still stay on quietly out of loyalty and out of their distaste for making a public fuss.

It would be hard, however, to overestimate the damage done by Presidents who do not encourage plain and honest dissent within the official family, and by loyal and sensitive Cabinet members and White House staffers who do not speak their mind but stay on out of sympathy, courtesies, fear, or ambition.

Did the Cabinet agree with Mr. Nixon's and Mr. Agnew's campaign in the last election, were they ever consulted about this kind of campaign? Did they agree about the invasion of Cambodia or the recent bombing and rescue raids on North Vietnam? The evidence is that most of them were not consulted, and that those of them who disagreed have not made their views known to the President, even now.

So maybe Hickel's dissent and the President's decision to bounce him is better than the polite conspiracy of silence that has tended to prevail in the last quarter of the century in Washington. At least it is clear and candid. Mr. Hickel didn't slam the door as he went out. He slipped out the back gate, but he made his position and so did the President. Private dissent is distasteful in this Administration, and public dissent by a Cabinet member is unforgivable.