

Nixon supercabinet tightens control at White House

WASHINGTON — Obscured by his wholesale bureaucratic purge, President Nixon has quietly buried half his cabinet and fashioned a radical new instrument for running the domestic side of the government: a small supercabinet, intertwined with the White House staff and embodying Nixon reorganization schemes spurned by Congress.

This structure has not been announced and may never be formally unveiled:

In overall command will be White House domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman and Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz, wearing a new second hat as presidential assistant. Its members, dividing domestic policy areas, are: Shultz for economics; Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) Caspar Weinberger for human resources; Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz for natural resources; Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) James Lynn for community development.

No coincidence

It is no coincidence that these policy areas are identical to new cabinet departments proposed by Mr. Nixon in 1971 and turned down flat by Congress. Nor is it coincidence that old departments abolished by the 1971 reorganization plan—Interior, Labor, Commerce, Transportation, for example—are now given second-class status.

Thus, working in stealth while Congress recessed, Mr. Nixon has rebuilt the government to make sure domestic policy and operations will now be tightly controlled from the White House.

That control derives partly from obliteration of distinctions between White House staff and cabinet.

While Ehrlichman's huge domestic policy staff at the White House is now dis-

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banded, his top aides are scattered among cabinet departments. Likewise, assistant and under secretaries are now picked by the White House, a precedent-breaking step. Still uncertain is whether Butz, Weinberger and Lynn will join Shultz as White House staffers.

Supercabinet members

Most important than this commingling are the four supercabinet members themselves: all are intelligent, tough and energetic. None has ever held elective office or sought publicity. Above all, they will cause Mr. Nixon no trouble; none has his own constituency to interfere with the President's grand design of scaling down the federal government.

A case in point is Lynn, the new secretary of HUD. His predecessor, former Gov. George Romney of Michigan, antagonized the White House by pushing racially integrated housing and promoting more money for the cities. Lynn, a Cleveland lawyer without political experience, has no such divided loyalties. As under secretary of Commerce, he impressed the White House with his dependability and low profile.

But, critics say, Lynn knows nothing about urban needs. "That's all right," a top presidential adviser explained to us. "Jim Lynn is in there to stop programs, not start them."

A similar role

A similar role is envisioned for Weinberger at HEW. White House aides, irritated by incessant policy disagreements from liberal Republican Elliot Richardson at HEW, believe Weinberger will close down programs without protest.

That leaves the rest of the regular

cabinet with huge offices and long black limousines but no power. Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton, a former Republican national chairman, has become unpopular with Mr. Nixon and top aides. But with supercabinet member Butz taking policymaking in natural resources away from the Interior Department, Morton becomes a limousine puppet.

Just to make sure, the White House has assigned long-time Nixon aide John Whitaker as under secretary of the Interior. The fact that Morton has never gotten on with Whitaker completes the picture.

Ehrlichman buddy

Similarly, Ehrlichman deputy Bud Krogh is the new under secretary of Transportation to another limousine puppet, oil executive Clarence Brinegar. But there's not much worry there. Brinegar has informed an appreciative White House he does not care much for press conferences or press releases.

The old-line departments are retained only because Congress insists. Congressional Interior committees would rather deal with Interior Secretary Morton than natural resources czar Butz. But as the real source of power becomes apparent, Nixon aides reason, a practical Congress will turn there. So, the old-line departments could atrophy long before they are formally abolished.

The major contradiction here is the new secretary of Labor, hard-hat union chief Peter Brennan. Although the Labor Department is earmarked for oblivion, Brennan is not—a subject deserving attention in a later column.