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Nixon to Upgrade Hill Liaison

By David S. Broder

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President Nixon is prepared to make his most senior staff members available to groups of Senators and Representatives for "give-and-take" discussion of all issues that may arise in Congress this year, the head of the White House legislative liaison staff said.

The offer of extensive, informal consultations with such top presidential advisers as H.R. (Bob) Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman, Henry A. Kissinger and Peter M. Flanigan came from William E. Timmons, the assistant to the President for congressional relations.

It was but one of several conciliatory steps outlined by Timmons in a lengthy interview last week, all designed to smooth over points of conflict that arose in the past two years between the Democratic Congress and the Republican White House.

The President's top lobbyist also said Mr. Nixon would seek to upgrade departmental legislative liaison jobs to meet complaints from Congress and efforts to improve the legislative budget process.

The latter step, Timmons said, could avert any repetition of last year's bitter quarrel between Congress and the President over the control of Federal expenditures.

The 42-year-old head of the White House congressional relations staff said that Mr. Nixon was determined to



H. R. HALDEMAN



JOHN EHRLICHMAN



PETER FLANIGAN

... these Nixon advisers would have informal talks with congressmen

do what he could to ease conflicts over executive privilege, the control of spending and the handling of legislative requests.

Of the three, the offer of informal consultations with top-level White House staffers represented perhaps the biggest step by the President to meet Capitol Hill criticisms.

Senators and Representatives of both parties have charged that Mr. Nixon has centralized decision-making

in his White House staff members, who, unlike Cabinet officials, can invoke the doctrine of executive privilege to refuse testimony to congressional committees handling legislation in their areas of responsibility.

The Senate Government Operations Committee, under its new chairman, Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), is expected to challenge this authority in hearings this winter.

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Timmons Provides Access

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Timmons said in the tape-recorded interview that Mr. Nixon "actually has not exerted executive privilege as much as other Presidents have." He said White House records indicate only three instances when congressional requests were refused on grounds of executive privilege in Mr. Nixon's first four years in office.

He also said that, without publicity, meetings had been arranged with interested legislators and such men as Daniel P. Moynihan, former counselor to the President, domestic affairs chief Ehrlichman and national security adviser Kissinger. The Kissinger sessions, he said, were held "informally at the Blair House and at Bill Fulbright's house and other places." (Sen. J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.)

Now, Timmons said, "I have a plan working" that would broaden those conferences into a program of regular "working lunches" or meetings between senior White House staff members and leading members of Congress involved with a particular issue.

"I'd like to see regular meetings, either down here or up on the Hill," he said, "with a good give-and-take issue exchange. . . . I hope we can do a lot of that this next year."

Timmons said the timing and format of the sessions had not yet been discussed with congressional leaders but that the project had the endorsement of the senior White House aides who would be involved.

Timmons specified in the interview that the meetings would have to be informal sessions, without a record or transcript, "not because there is something to hide, but because I'm afraid if it becomes a matter of record, it sets a precedent for them demanding it in the future. I think we've got to protect the President from that."

He also said the sessions could not violate "the tradition that White House staff people do not talk about personal communications with the President."

Whether meetings held under those restrictions would satisfy congressional demands for access to Administration decision-making is not clear.

But Timmons said that "if they (the members of Congress) are not trying to demagogue it or trying to bring in cameras and embarrass us . . . if they are sincerely interested in trying to find out something that they feel is important," the top White House staffers will be available to them.

On the question of control of Fed-

real spending, which provoked a major showdown with Congress at the end of the 1972 session, Timmons said "this President would be perfectly happy for Congress" to set its own budget ceiling.

"As long as it's reasonable," he said, "the President would accept that." There might still be disagreements between Congress and the Executive over the proper funding level for specific programs, but Timmons said:

"If they (the House and Senate) would get together . . . and set a ceiling based on expected income, I think the President would be very happy with that."

The congressional liaison chief said he thought the President might use the State of the Union address later this month "to prod" Congress to improve its own budgetmaking mechanism into something that would give it tighter control of fiscal policy than the existing system of more than a dozen separate appropriations bills.

"There is some resentment in Congress over the President interfering with . . . their own procedures," he acknowledged. "And I recognize that. But this area is so important . . . I would hope to see him make some statements either in the State of the Union message or in a press conference . . . urging them to come up with one."

Timmons said his own suggestion would be that the Democratic and Republican leaders of the House and Senate, the members of the House Ways and Means and Senate Finance committees and the two Appropriations Committees "get together and come up with what they feel is a proper ceiling" on spending.

"I'm talking about those that really have power . . . agreeing informally, if not formally, after consulting with the administration and the membership of House and Senate . . . and putting out a statement they could all sign, saying we think the budget for next year ought to be such-and-such a figure, based on projected income.

"They could say we have consulted and we think that such-and-such a percentage of this should be for defense, and so much for veterans, and so on, and therefore we urge the committees concerned to work within these guidelines."

Timmons called this "a practical first step" toward congressional control of spending, even if the recommendation is neither binding nor unanimous. "It would be an easy first step for them," he said, "and it would show

their interest and concern" about the spending problem.

Timmons said Mr. Nixon "wants to get the best quality people in the departments' and agencies' congressional liaison jobs "and wants them to carry a greater burden of their own legislative program load" in the next four years.

To that end, he said, the President will seek legislative authority to upgrade the congressional liaison job in each department to the assistant-secretary level. At present, he said, only the State Department and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare confer that status on their top Capitol Hill lobbyist.

Timmons said "the President feels it (the upgrading) would be helpful in them involved in policy formulation, attracting qualified people, in getting and in having them perceived as the President's men, carrying presidential commissions."

The fact that they would have to be confirmed in their jobs by the Senate would require Congress "to acknowledge that they accept these guys in their role," he added.

Timmons said that the white House "is recommending to the Cabinet officers those we think are qualified" for the proposed new jobs "and they in turn . . . will make their own determination. So far there has been no conflict . . . A Cabinet officer wouldn't want to put a congressional guy on that couldn't work with us, and certainly we wouldn't want to put a guy on that couldn't work with his Cabinet officer."

He said the names of the new departmental liaison officers would be released later.

"If we have capable people in all the departments, we feel it can take a load off of us," Timmons said. He is going into the new Congress with four of the same assistants he had last year — Richard K. Cook, Max L. Friedersdorf, Wallace H. Johnson and Tom C. Korologos. Two others who have worked with him — William Gifford and John Nidecker — have taken other assignments.

Timmons said he hoped the upgrading of the departmental liaison jobs "would ease a lot of friction that may have existed in the past. Members say such-and-such a Cabinet officer 'doesn't know who I am, and I serve on his committee.' Well, that's bad."

"By the end of June, I will be surprised if they complain they can't get through to the Cabinet officer or can't get through to anybody in the department. I will be very much surprised if there are any complaints like that."