

Controversial Kissinger Aide

Helmut Sonnenfeldt

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 30— Testifying before the Senate Finance Committee recently on his nomination as Under Secretary of the Treasury, Helmut Sonnenfeldt remarked with a tinge of sarcasm, "I may be one of the more investigated persons in this town."

He was alluding to wiretaps and occasional tailing by security agents during his 17 years as a State Department employe and, again, to the wiretap on his telephone from May, 1969, to February, 1971. Investigated, yes, but Mr. Sonnenfeldt is also one of the least known men of influence in the Nixon Administration and, depending on whom you listen to, one of the most admired or least loved officials in Washington.

But George P. Shultz, Secretary of the Treasury, badly wanted the 47-year-old career official to supervise growing United States-Soviet trade and to provide the department with political advice and a political link to the national security apparatus at the White House.

Mr. Sonnenfeldt, who was confirmed by the Senate Finance Committee today, is unknown partly because of his professional penchant for secrecy, bordering on the conspiratorial, and partly because he made a habit of avoiding the limelight while working for a man who has been exposed to extensive publicity — the President's national security adviser and Secretary of State, Henry A. Kissinger.

A State Department analyst who worked for Mr. Sonnenfeldt when he directed research on Soviet affairs dubbed him Papa Doc, using the nickname of the secretive Haitian dictator Dr. François Duvalier. But it was meant with cynical affection, for, the analyst went on, "I feel like a mother to him."

Respect, Hurt Feelings

At the State Department the 47-year-old Hal Sonnenfeldt is remembered with a mixture of feelings of respect and memories of wounded egos. "He was a very demanding taskmaster," a Foreign Service officer said, "and sometimes he ran roughshod. Like many brilliant people he can't tolerate mediocrity. We all had fights with him, but we would welcome him back because we respect him."

Although he is usually soft-spoken, his direct manner is also recalled. "He would tell you, you look fat," a woman said. "He was not kind to peoples' sensitivities."

Helmut Sonnenfeldt was born Sept. 13, 1926 in Berlin, the son of Walter H. and Gertrude Liebenthal Sonnenfeldt, German physicians of Jewish origin. The family, including his brother, Richard, fled Hitler Germany in 1938.

The elder Sonnenfeldts deposited Helmut in an English school and went on to the United States. He followed in 1944 and, after a term at Johns Hopkins University, joined the United States Army. Seeking combat duty, he kept his knowledge of German to himself to avoid an intelligence assignment in Europe and was sent to the Pacific as an infantryman.

In 1946 he was posted briefly to his native Germany, in the United States occupation zone. There he met another returned native, Sgt. Henry Kissinger.

Mr. Sonnenfeldt, returning to Johns Hopkins, earned Bachelor's and Master's De-

grees in political science in 1950-51.

In Baltimore he met Marjorie Hecht of the department store family, and they were married in 1953, a year after he joined the State Department. They have three children.

Assigned to Soviet Affairs in the Office of Research and Analysis, he quickly won recognition as an excellent political analyst and promotions followed. After an interlude in disarmament affairs he was appointed director for Soviet and Eastern European research in 1966.

Mr. Sonnenfeldt, a registered Democrat with a profoundly conservative cast of mind, was an object of intense suspicion by several State Department security officers, chiefly Otto F. Otepka, the chief security evaluator until his removal in 1961. Allegations by Mr. Otepka and others that Mr.

Sonnenfeldt had leaked classified information to the press and, on one occasion, to a foreign diplomat led to surveillance and, in late 1960, to sharp interrogation. He was eventually cleared, the records indicate, by the State Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but the taint remained and renewed charges by Mr. Otepka caused Senate confirmation to be held up for five months.

In January, 1969, Mr. Sonnenfeldt was called to the National Security Council as one of its senior staff members, becoming not only the principal thinker conceiving Mr. Nixon's and Mr. Kissinger's policy of détente with the Soviet Union and China but also one of the main operatives, albeit in the shadows.

In the rare moments Mr. Sonnenfeldt relaxes, he enjoys tennis and sailing.