

The Spokes of Power

Aides of President Reportedly Invoke His Position to Command Obedience

By JOHN HERBERS

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WASHINGTON, May 17—There is said to be a high-level career official here who always stands up at his desk immediately after hearing five magic words: "The White House is calling."

That the caller might be a Presidential aide of low rank makes little difference. The caller may be on a mission for the President, and so great have been the powers of the Presidency in recent years that his assistants are clothed with the ability to shake up almost any department or agency of the executive branch.

This explains to a great extent how White House staff members were able to intimidate and compromise high officials in the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department.

A Long Trend

At the urging of John D. Ehrlichman, then assistant to the President, the State Department turned over 240 classified documents to E. Howard Hunt Jr., who allegedly used them to fabricate a cable implicating the Kennedy Administration in the death of South Vietnamese President Diem in 1963.

At the urging of Presidential aides, C.I.A. officials permitted the use of agency facilities to set up a burglarly of the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

L. Patrick Gray 3d, as acting F.B.I. director, allegedly burned files pertinent to the Watergate case, again at the urging of White House aides.

These incidents, and others during the first Nixon term, followed a long trend of the concentration of power in a few score men around the president.

George E. Reedy, Press Secretary to President Johnson, discussed this development in "The Twilight of the Presidency," published in 1970.

"The trouble with the White House—for anyone who is part of it," he said, "is that when he picks up the telephone and tells people to do something, they usually do it. The heel click at the other end of the wire will be audible and the response—however invalid—will be prompt."

According to Mr. Reedy, this

breeds arch arrogance, and the White House as an institution "provides camouflage for all that is petty and nasty in human beings, and enables a clown or a knave to pose as Galahad and be treated with deference."

For the young, Mr. Reedy believes, the effect can be particularly harmful.

"There should be a flat rule," he said, "that no one be permitted to enter the gates of the White House until he is at least 40 and has suffered major disappointments in life."

For years, the departments and agencies have seethed with stories of White House aids making outrageous or frivolous demands by saying, "The President would like . . ." or "The President is interested in this." The official on the other end has no way of knowing whether it is the President's or the aide's interest.

By most accounts, the power of Presidential aides has increased considerably under the Nixon Administration. Authority once centered in the departments has been moved to the White House. President Nixon has been more remote and less personally in touch with the bureaucracy than other recent Presidents.

Tap Files Seen

Under the leadership of H. R. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman, two top aides who have resigned, Presidential assistants were more aggressive in moving against the agencies and departments.

The entire Government, it seemed, was under tight control of the White House, which few dared challenge.

The Government has laws regulations that determine to some degree the authority of various officials in the executive branch and procedures for handling documents and information. Certain officials within the White House and outside it are cleared to handle classified material and other matters.

But so broad are the President's powers that he generally gets what he wants. It has not been unusual in recent years for Presidents to see confidential income tax files, F.B.I. investigative reports and other sensitive materials. The official who have custody of these documents generally know which Presidential aides serve as conduits for this material and which do not.



United Press International

Donald H. Segretti, right, leaving court yesterday in Tampa, Fla., after pleading not guilty to election violation charges. At left is Raymond LaPorte, his lawyer.

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