

William S. White

White House Aides: End Of a Myth

To poke around in the muddy debris of Watergate in search of something good somewhere is surely not the most rewarding of occupations. Nevertheless, it need not be a wholly idle effort.

For one illustration, as the Senate's investigation goes on—and on and on—the silly emptiness of a hardy and dangerous myth of Washington is at last being exploded. This is the melodramatic legend of the all-powerful “White House aide,” the mystique of a Palace Guard which operates almost at parity with the President himself and must never, never be challenged.

All this is the sheerest of nonsense. And though it has survived through three successive administrations, it is going to be thoroughly disposed of—put in “the burn bag” so to speak—before the Ervin committee hearings have run their course. This is at any rate a fall-out that will be of some value for the future. After all, it is all to the good whenever and wherever a truth is able to drive out a fiction from our public affairs.

If one is to believe him, L. Patrick Gray, as head of the FBI, bowed in almost religious awe to John Dean's and John Ehrlichman's dictates that he go and destroy top secret papers. He did so, he says, simply because he supposed these two White House assistants to be “acting in the color of their authority.” (Even the phrase itself expresses a kind of mystical quality.)

Any responsible official not obsessed with the notion that mere staff functionaries must invariably speak with all the knowledge—and power—of the President of the United States would of course have told Dean and Ehrlichman to go to the devil. He would have insisted on receiving such orders only from Richard Nixon, or not at all.

But Patrick Gray was caught up in one of the great illusions of Washington, which was that any employee of the President's staff who was in physical proximity to him was somehow a kind of unelected President himself. This absurd stereotype got a pretty good hold in President Eisenhower's time—when, for example, Sherman Adams was seriously believed by many to be “running everything in the White House.”

It got a widening circle of true believers in the eras of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. The reason was that Eisenhower in his time and Kennedy and Johnson in their times thought it hardly necessary to go around announcing that it was the President who made the decisions in the White House.

It was, moreover, an attractive myth to many in politics and journalism who in their work established relationships with this or that “White House aide.” Humanly, such men warmed themselves with the conviction, ridiculous though it was, that here they were, right in intimate contact with the very summit of American power.

Such a mystique has always been damaging in the general sense, since it has led so many to believe they knew

the mind and purposes of a President when in fact what they knew was the mind and purposes of some employee in the White House. It is positively calamitous in the case of President Nixon, assuming that he was indeed unaware of the “White House horrors,” as John Mitchell has called them, that were perpetrated in the President's name.

If Mr. Nixon had long since cut down the myth, which could have been done only by cutting the Deans and Ehrlichmans down to actual size, even the most romantically credulous could have got the message as to where White House power really lay. Poor Gray (again assuming he is telling the truth) could have been spared much. So could many others. And so, God help us, could the United States of America.

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