

WHITE HOUSE UNIT TAKES ON NEW LIFE

Office of Communications
Had Seemed About to Be
a Watergate Casualty

By JOHN HERBERS

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 25—

For several months this year it appeared that the White House Office of Communications, the touch and ready operation that Charles W. Colson used last year to promote Richard Nixon's Presidency, was about to become a casualty of the Watergate scandals.

Critics of the Administration had charged that the office was too much of a propaganda operation for democratic Government, and some of the President's advisers thought that it should be abolished to show that a new order of staff operations had been established in the wake of the Watergate disclosures.

Now, however, the office has taken on new life and has a prominent role in the defense of President Nixon against demands that he resign, although it does not command the authority that it did before the White House was weakened by Watergate.

Among other things, the office is directing a surrogate program, similar to that used last year when Mr. Nixon was running for re-election, under which various officials in the Administration are publicly speaking out in defense of the President.

Director Gets Limousine

Around the White House, where there is acute sensitivity to status symbols, the view that the office has been salvaged is bolstered by the fact that the acting director, Ken W. Clawson, was recently assigned a limousine under Class A privileges.

Continuance of the office following the shake-up of the White House staff that began in the spring is seen by some observers as one of a number of signs that little has changed in the way the Nixon White House is run since the departure of the President's two chief aides, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman.

The office, which operates separately from the White House press office, is unique to the Nixon Presidency. It was established by Herbert G. Klein, who had the title of Director of Communications for the Executive Branch, when Mr. Nixon

became President.

However, Mr. Colson, a particularly aggressive Presidential assistant, took over the office—leaving Mr. Klein with the title but little authority—and used it last year as an instrument for re-election of the President. One of the efforts was the surrogate program, under which Cabinet members and other officials were sent around the country making speeches for Mr. Nixon, who did little campaigning on his own.

Mr. Colson left the Administration early this year and Mr. Klein resigned in August, leaving Mr. Clawson, who had the title of deputy director, in charge. He operates with a staff of 10 out of a suite of offices overlooking the White House in the Executive Office Building.

A Former Reporter

The 37-year-old Mr. Clawson, a former reporter for The Washington Post, is a chubby man with owl eyes and a raspy voice. He is an unabashed partisan who believes in the hard sell and the bare-knuckles attack. A few days ago, when he was filling in during an emergency at the White House press office, he walked into a group of reporters and sang out:

"Does anyone want a piece of Chuck Connors?"

That was his way of asking if anyone wanted to interview the actor, who was there to see the President before visiting Russia and the Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev, who had taken a liking to him last summer in San Clemente, Calif.

When someone remarked that he had never heard "such a blatant public relations sales pitch," Mr. Clawson said he did not care, that several television and radio interviews had resulted from it.

Campaign in Spring

In this fashion, Mr. Clawson last spring was running a campaign to hold the line against Congressional moves to end President Nixon's impoundment of appropriated funds, deploying high officials throughout the executive branch as speakers and coordinating publicity among Government public relations agents in the departments and agencies.

This effort faded after the Watergate disclosures. Now Mr. Clawson is conducting a similar if less authoritative effort in defense of the President. In addition to scheduling Administration speakers on television and radio programs, Mr. Clawson's office is mailing out information and suggested lines of attack and counterattack to department and agency heads.

Some Cabinet members, taking advantage of lessened White House control, have said they threw the material away and put what they wanted in speeches. But some of it reaches the public in one form or another.