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The Growing 'Malaise' at the White House

The impression outside the White House that time is running out on President Nixon was furthered this week by the resignation of an idealistic young speechwriter, apparently as an act of conscience, and indications that an idealistic older speechwriter is nearing resignation after being ignored for months.

John Andrews, a little-known junior speechwriter, left to go into full-time religious work in Denver with a farewell letter which several White House staffers described as "sour." Simultaneously, these staffers were speculating that Raymond K. Price Jr., once a top Nixon speechwriter but shelved lately, would soon quit. The two developments are unrelated, but it is no coincidence that Price and Andrews are among the few idealists on a hard-nosed White House staff dominated by self-styled pragmatists.

Moreover, the imminent departure of some key non-idealists means a thin line will remain at the White House in these crisis days. Apart from causing practical difficulties, this unquestionably will trigger inferences from the outside that Mr. Nixon's own men are bailing out.

Some prominent Republicans are—correctly or not—drawing that inference from the departure of speech-

writer Andrews, publicly anonymous until his resignation. What broke his anonymity was Andrews' turning the routine farewell letter to his colleagues into an impassioned declaration of principle by a lieutenant leaving his embattled President.

"The steadiest star to steer by," Andrews wrote, "is Richard Nixon's own 1968 statement that the presidency is preeminently a place of moral leadership." He added that, "held to that course," the Nixon administration "cannot fail to make safe port." He then continued: "Great endeavors risk great errors, as we have learned to our pain; but the forces they loose, though certain to unmake the unworthy, only deepen character."

The equivocal wording, which some presidential aides viewed as subject to multiple interpretation, is highly unusual for such a letter. Although some presidential staffers insist Andrews implied no criticism, others consider it a cry of disillusionment. "The way the letter was couched," one senior aide told us, "I'd say Andrews was a bit sour."

His friends outside the White House strongly confirm that judgment. They believe Andrews, a devout Christian Scientist like many other Nixon aides,

could take no more of the present White House. Since Andrews is a conservative admired enough by the President to take him along to the Soviet Union in 1972, his departure becomes yet another straw on the camel's back, in the Capitol Hill view.

Price's departure is not yet certain. (When asked recently by an old friend whether he was quitting, Price replied cryptically: "Not yet.") But his colleagues are sure he will depart soon.

The reason is not hard to find. Price, an editor on the old New York Herald Tribune, joined Mr. Nixon's 1968 campaign early and was a principal speechwriter through mid-1973. But since helping draft the President's statement of last May 22, Price has not been visible. "I just haven't seen Ray around," confides a Nixon adviser deeply involved in Watergate deliberations. Mr. Nixon simply has not sought the services of his most idealistic and most liberal speechwriter.

Less indicative of the White House malaise but more damaging to operational efficiency may be the return to private industry of counselor Bryce Harlow. Whereas the resignation of Melvin R. Laird as counselor was long ago discounted, the recent disclosure

of Harlow's imminent departure was a shocker inside the White House.

Who can possibly replace the smoothly efficient Harlow in troubleshooting chores such as riding herd on Gerald Ford's confirmation and congressional investigation of San Clemente? There is, in truth, little chance of finding any replacement approaching Harlow's quality at this low point in the Nixon administration.

While unable to recruit from the outside, the White House faces restlessness within. One middle-level staffer, neither a liberal nor an idealist, now believes that Mr. Nixon at best can limp through his remaining days as President. This aide doubts that he wants to spend the next three years that way, particularly if seldom able to gain admittance to Mr. Nixon's office. Therefore, he is contemplating early resignation.

Every such resignation undercuts the President's position. With Mr. Nixon limiting regular contact to staff chief Alexander Haig and Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, the thinning-down suggests to the outside world disintegration at the White House even worse than actually exists.