

Haldeman-Ehrlichman

The horrors now afflicting the nation's veterans programs can be traced to the radical plan of the old Haldeman-Ehrlichman White House, officially repudiated but surviving nevertheless, to centralize all power in the Oval Office during President Nixon's second term.

Although H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman are long gone, their grand design endures—administered by spiritual heirs and generally ignored by Watergate-preoccupied Washington. The disruptive results are now surfacing in one agency after another. In the Veterans Administration (VA), the political explosion has just begun.

A central feature of the Haldeman-Ehrlichman plan was to place trusted Nixon aides, from the White House and the widely defamed Committee for the Re-Election of the President (CREEP), in key positions of executive departments. Running the government then would be Haldeman and his staff, backed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) headed by Roy Ash and his deputy, Fred Malek, who had been second-in-command at CREEP.

Named by Malek to be White House agent for VA's multibillion-dollar operations was Frank Naylor, fresh from a stint at CREEP rounding up veterans

organizations' support for the Nixon-Agnew ticket. Naylor moved into VA's plush 10th floor executive offices as a supergrade 18 paying \$43,926.

Other CREEP alumni from the Malek stable moved to lesser VA jobs. Among the many: Michael Bronson, a CREEP field representative as assistant administrator for planning and evaluation; Andrew Adams, a Kansas coordinator for CREEP as deputy director in VA's now-embattled education division.

What was happening at the VA reflected a radical effort to give the White House total control of all major bureaus and departments. Now, 15 months later, the outcome at the VA is clear: utter disaster.

Naylor, who came to VA without experience in the agency's highly specialized work, has now been quietly shunted to the Farmers Home Administration. Bronson is on his way out. Adams, a polio victim confined to a wheelchair, is slated to run the new rehabilitation office in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (but powerful congressmen may block that appointment).

This accelerating collapse of the Haldeman-Ehrlichman centralization of power barely begins the story of the VA's crisis.

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Legacy: Chaos in the VA!

The American Legion cheered when then Republican Sen. Jack Miller of Iowa (defeated for re-election in 1972) persuaded Mr. Nixon in 1969 to name Don Johnson, a fringe Iowa Republican politician and former national commander of the Legion, to head the VA. Today, however, even the Legion has soured on Johnson's performance running the VA's 171 hospitals, 59 regional offices and tens of thousands of employees.

"Don," said one congressional critic, "is a political primitive who plays everything by the Malek rule book." Malek's first rule is saving money. Thus, Johnson's critics complain he automatically overrides his own experts, plus the organized veterans' lobbies, to accept OMB's budget proposals even at the expense of essential veterans' services.

The most dramatic case was the Johnson-contrived ouster last week of Dr. Marc J. Musser, VA's highly regarded chief medical director. In a private letter April 3 to Rep. Olin Teague, ranking Democrat on the Veterans Committee, and Sen. Alan Cranston, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Veterans Health and Hospitals, Musser said that "an antagonistic and uncooperative administrator (Johnson)" made his job impossible

and that "the infiltration of the department by personnel selected and appointed by . . . the administrator has virtually eliminated any possibility of functional integrity" in the medical branch.

When Musser came under attack by Johnson's office last year, then presidential counselor Melvin Laird interceded. Laird wrung from Johnson a firm agreement to stop interfering with Musser's operation.

More significant, Mr. Nixon himself strongly indicated to Teague last December that Musser would stay. Now, with the President preoccupied with fighting impeachment and with Laird gone, Musser has been hounded out of office.

Musser's top deputy, Dr. Benjamin F. Wells, was also forced out. Wells told us Johnson "just could not stand" Wells' connections with powerful congressional Democrats.

By throwing its full weight behind Johnson, OMB retains draconian control over VA's budget. The cost is high: loss of support from the powerful veterans' lobby, from tens of thousands of Vietnam veterans, and administrative chaos in the VA. Such is one bitter after-taste of the Haldeman-Ehrlichman blueprint for power.