

Mr. Nixon's Neglected Cabinet

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, May 16—The President's Cabinet has been pue in an awkward position by the impeachment inquiry in Congress, and it is clear from their public statements that they have been neglected by the White House and that they have not yet sorted out their loyalties.

For example, Claude S. Brinegar, the President's Transportation Secretary, told the National Press Club here the other day that he was "shocked, offended and discouraged," by the Watergate "mess" but didn't want the President to resign.

On the same day, Secretary of Commerce Frederick B. Dent told an audience in Greensboro, N. C., that the President's Watergate transcripts showed that the President was not guilty of any criminal act, but he added that the President's political enemies were leading the impeachment drive and that the media had tried to obscure "these facts and dwell on this subject with a vindictiveness and glee that distort a fair evaluation of the broader issues of the day."

Meanwhile, senior members of the Cabinet like Henry Kissinger at State and James Schlesinger at Defense, though they are constantly invited to pass judgment on the transcripts, have

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tried to stay out of the public controversy and concentrated on their jobs, and this seems to be the sensible thing to do during the impeachment process.

The main thing for the moment is that the executive branch of the Government should keep going at maximum efficiency while the President is preoccupied with his own defense. He has set the direction of policy but it is carried out by the Cabinet and the civil service, and the more he is diverted by the impeachment charges against him, the more he has to rely on the Cabinet and the bureaucracy to keep the engine of Government going.

Actually, there is no institutionalized Cabinet in Washington. Maybe there should be, and if there had been, the Watergate scandals and the cover-up could not possibly have happened, but there isn't. Cabinet members have no constituencies of their own. They were not elected as a governing body. They were the personal choices of the President, confirmed by the Senate, and their main job is to administer his policies as the principal executive officers of their departments.

That is the present situation of the

Nixon Cabinet under the prevailing difficulties, but it does not mean that they are bound to support whatever the President does. They can resign if they think Mr. Nixon's policies are wrong, or that he has lost the confidence essential to win consent for his policies in Congress or in the world.

Some key members of the Cabinet may quit if the erosion of respect for the President's character and authority go on, but it has not reached that point yet. Mr. Kissinger is still able to mediate in the Middle East conflict. Mr. Schlesinger is still able to negotiate effectively with the Russians on strategic arms control, and with the West Europeans, who have even more political instability than Washington, on NATO and the defense of the free world.

But the White House cannot use Cabinet members like Secretary Dent as propagandists against impeachment without getting in deep trouble with other members of the Cabinet. Anyway, Patrick Buchanan on the White House staff is much better at propaganda than Mr. Dent. When Pat defends the President but disarms the opposition by saying he didn't find the White House tapes "spiritually uplifting," who needs Dent?

Mr. Kissinger is the key figure in this Cabinet question. He is staying out of the Watergate and impeachment battles. One suspects he may even be prolonging his shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East in order to avoid the even more complicated and poisonous political controversies of Washington.

But the way things are going here, the Cabinet, even if it is weak and divided, cannot be ignored. If Cabinet members stuck to their jobs, as they probably should for the time being, but found that the President was going to fight it out to the last Senator, they could protest and probably bring the President down.

Mr. Kissinger is being careful now to avoid talking like Mr. Dent for the President on the evidence of the tapes, or like Mr. Brinegar, deploring the tapes, though he undoubtedly has his own private opinion.

But he also has a conviction about the responsibility of the Cabinet. He is, after all, a historian, with his own memories and models. He may very well ask what Henry Stimson or Charles Evans Hughes would have done if they had to choose between the President and the Republic, and if things go on as they are, he could resign like Anthony Eden in protest against the policies of Chamberlain.

All this is very vague and remote but it should not be discounted. For the position of the Cabinet can be important. It could even be decisive, particularly if Mr. Kissinger felt he could no longer carry out his responsibilities to an impeached President. But Mr. Nixon is not talking to his Cabinet about this problem. He is assuming their loyalty to him, forgetting that unlike Messrs. Ehrlichman and Halde- man, they may be driven in the crisis to consider a higher loyalty to the nation.