

FORD: THE CABINET CONNECTION



In *The Week That Was* in Washington, one familiar speculation came into play even before it was certain that Richard Nixon would turn over his office to Gerald Ford. If Ford were to become President, the speculation ran, one distinct change you could count on was that he would gradually restore the Cabinet as an institution and his Cabinet members themselves to positions of pre-eminence and clout: no more overblown, overreaching and unaccountable White House staffs.

It is not, I think, excessively cynical to observe that every President in recent memory has made precisely the same pledge at his accession to office, or has had it made in his behalf by friends and journalists in the know. Richard Nixon, in his euphoric days as President-elect, repeatedly made the assertion from his headquarters at New York's Hotel Pierre, and he made it as a reproach to what he regarded as Lyndon Johnson's unhealthy concentration of power in the White House. Lyndon Johnson himself, of course, had previously let it be known that he intended to do the same thing—as a reproach to the fabled, strong-arming “Irish Mafia” of the Kennedy years.

Usually we of the press go heavy on the story, through the suspense-filled days of Cabinet selection right up to the grand finale when the newly “powerful” group is in place. I say “finale” because after that you hardly hear of most of them, except as shocked or snickering stories go the rounds about how this Cabinet member or that was dressed down by a White House aide. Through the Kennedy and Johnson years and well into Richard Nixon's first term, the late Dean Acheson—former Secretary of State and something of an expert on these matters—used to marvel, without admiration, at the way Cabinet members in modern times were letting themselves be shoved around by a bunch of obscure “pip-squeaks” on Pennsylvania Avenue.

IT DOES MATTER

When the eventual changes in personnel have been made, will President Ford's Administration be any different? And does it really matter if it is—or is this just some esoteric concern of Washington government watchers? I think the answer to the first question is that the new Administration should *try* to be different. As in so many other matters, the Nixon White House has demonstrated what is

at the end of the line when certain unhappy tendencies of the contemporary Presidency are indulged. And the manner in which self-important White House aides were finally transformed into conspirators should at the very least suggest to President Ford the wisdom of spreading the wealth a little. To say as much is also to answer the second question: it *does* matter. The challenge—and it is one that has grown with the swollen power and size of the executive branch—is to find a way to resolve competing claims among the interests represented by individual Cabinet members without resorting to a super-directorate lodged in the offices adjoining the President's.

The constancy of the desire of newly installed Presidents to restore Cabinet members to positions of authority proceeds, I think, from the same set of facts that makes it very hard for them to do so. George Romney, Melvin Laird, Walter Hickel, William Rogers—traditionally Cabinet officers are figures of some accomplishment, stature and prestige in their own right. You don't fool around with them—you reward them and set them up in the most important principalities of your empire. They are also generally people whose advice is valuable and whose constituencies are taken seriously. So a government in which such figures are given the greatest possible degree of independence and respect seems desirable.

PART OF THE PROBLEM

That is the drawing-board part. In reality, what quickly happens is that a majority of Cabinet members become identified in the minds of the President and his staff as part of the problem, not part of the solution. Individually each becomes just a spokesman for one more pressure group beating on the door, fighting his peers for budget funds and jurisdiction, raising issues somebody else has to settle. It is instructive, I think, to note that Cabinet members who have fallen from White House grace over the past several years have almost invariably been charged with the same failures: incompetence, treachery and going native (as they say of ambassadors who come to think of themselves as representing the host country's interests in Washington, and not the other way around). All three charges, in turn, rest on a single basic complaint: it is that the Secretary, who is a political ap-

pointee, has not re-directed or gained control of the despised bureaucracy of his department—either because he is inept or because he has joined up.

When such discontents come into play, it turns out that the Cabinet member is in the weakest of all positions to fight back. That is the reverse side of the fame and importance he brings to office. The bureaucracy has the strength of tenure: it knows its way around and can't be fired, or not easily anyway. The White House aide may not have tenure, but he has the strength that derives from proximity to the President. A call from a White House aide, as the story of John Ehrlichman and the CIA reveals—or John Ehrlichman and Richard Kleindienst or John Ehrlichman and practically anyone else—is generally regarded as having the force of a Presidential command. And usually, even if the aide is much farther down the line, the Cabinet member does as he is told.

THE UNIQUE LAIRD

Melvin Laird is known to have been almost unique among Cabinet members in the first Nixon Administration for his disinclination, if not outright refusal, to tap-dance at the order of Presidential assistants. And the fact that he is so closely associated with President Ford may bode well for the prospect of a minidecentralization of power. That and the awful example of what can happen when the foot-stamping master sergeants of the White House run amok should go a certain way to insuring that the new President will give the idea a better try than his predecessors did.

To be sure, owing to the excesses of White House power-gathering over the last two decades that culminated in Watergate, legislation is pending to cut the Oval Office down to size. But I set less store by the statutory possibilities than by the dictates of good sense and the instinct for self-preservation. President Ford, I expect, will seek some mechanism for maintaining an overview of his Administration that does not close out the advice and influence of the most responsible and accomplished people at his disposal.

God knows Richard Nixon has given him plenty of reason to do so.