

Nixon's Defenders Gather

'Cocktails With Clawson'— Perhaps Best Show in Town

By Don Bacon

Newhouse News Service

Room 160 of the Old executive Office Building is an unlikely arena for President Nixon's small band of defenders to be waging their fight to keep him in office.

Yet here is where a main thrust of Mr. Nixon's defense is taking place. In this well-appointed, high-ceilinged room, overlooking the White House, the President's most zealous and ar-

ticulate defenders have been gathering almost daily in the late afternoon to argue the President's case with an invitation-only audience of reporters, who convey it to the public.

Apparently lacking substantive evidence that will exonerate him before Congress and the courts, Mr. Nixon has been turning increasingly to the public as his ultimate jurors. His unusual interview this past

week with conservative columnist James J. Kilpatrick was half an explanation of the Nixon view of impeachment and resignation, half an appeal to the public.

The one and two-a-day "news briefings" in Room 160 of the Executive Office Building are the brainchild of the chief entrepreneur of White House propaganda,

See **CLAWSON, G4, Col. 1**



KEN W. CLAWSON
... the engineer

CLAWSON, From G1

Ken W. Clawson, a former reporter for Mr. Nixon's journalistic nemesis, The Washington Post. Clawson, who knows the strengths and weaknesses of the press better than anyone else around Mr. Nixon, has helped greatly to open up the White House to reporters since he was named Director of Communication in mid-January. That has been a worthwhile contribution, as far as the press and public are concerned, but Clawson, himself remains a controversial and not-entirely trusted figure in the White House press room.

His main job, Clawson says, is to see that the President's and the Administration's point of view is laid out in the press, including

television. He expresses outrage and tends to threaten alleged offenders when that point of view is ignored or inadequately, in his opinion, presented. He has been known to phone Walter Cronkite in the middle of a broadcast to demand that White House comment on a particular story be aired before the broadcast ends.

The Clawson-arranged news briefings have been the source of most of the White House defense of the President's edited Watergate transcripts. The sessions are on-the-record and free-swinging. For the past two weeks, he has brought forward a succession of key White House staff members—including Counsellors Ann Armstrong and Dean Burch, speechwriter Patrick J. Bu-



REV. JOHN McLAUGHLIN
... speaks on morality

chanan, Chief Watergate Counsel James D. St. Clair and even Father John McLaughlin to defend the



ANNE ARMSTRONG
... a defender

President's version of Watergate and the cover-up. Perhaps the most unusual session—maybe the most un-



JAMES D. ST. CLAIR
... chief counsel

usual news conference of the season—saw Father McLaughlin, a Roman Catholic priest who is on the



DEAN BURCH
... "cocktails" guest

White House payroll as a presidential spokesman and adviser, attempt to defend the tone and the morality of

the Nixon transcripts. "The conclusion that they are amoral or immoral," the priest said, relaxing in one of Clawson's wingback chairs, while reporters sipped Pepsi and ginger ale, "is erroneous, unjust and contains elements of hypocrisy."

Clawson calls his gatherings "Cocktails with Clawson"—he even has had drink napkins printed with that silly title—although reporters come (at Clawson's invitation) for the news and enlightenment, not to mingle in fellowship with the White House staff. Very little booze is consumed, although lots of Clawson's soft drinks, Fritos and onion dip disappear daily.

Nearly 50 of the sessions have taken place since January, more than a dozen since the disastrous publication of

the Watergate transcripts. Clawson thinks the results, in terms of getting the White House view into print and onto the news shows, have been "splendid." He plans to keep the President's news-making spokesmen coming into Room 160, and has been hoping to inaugurate a similar morning session for Congressional reporters. Naturally he plans to call the morning briefings "Coffee with Clawson."

Because the President is not holding his own news conferences, because knowledgeable White House aides increasingly are unavailable to individual reporters, and because the regular White House press briefings have degenerated into disgraceful exercises in evasion, Clawson is producing about the best show in town.