Turmoil at the Top

An Inaccessible Nixon Stirs Anger and Despair Within Administration

Aides Charged With Isolating President; Some Officials Are Talking of Resigning

White House Staff's Defense

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WASHINGTON—A deepening malaise grips the highest levels of the Nixon Administration, as many of the men the President picked to help him run the Government find themselves increasingly cut off from access to the Chief Executive himself.

Cabinet members and sub-Cabinet officials complain that Mr. Nixon is insulated from them by a screen of elite aides; information and competing opinions fail to filter through to the lonely Oval Office. Issues pile up awaiting decision. When a decision does finally emerge, the Cabinet men and their top lieutenants may find it unrecognizable; their counsel has been overruled by the men in the tiny innermost circle.

Morale sags. Men who planned to stay the course now talk of leaving, and men who planned to leave at the end of the year talk of leaving now.

Many Issues Involved

The troubling situation can hardly be overstated. The unhappiness and disillusionment is deep and wide, predating Cambodia and Kent State and encompassing a range of domestic and foreign issues. Interior Secretary Walter Hickel's plaintive bid for the Presidential ear—a Cabinet member forced to write a letter and leak it to the press in order to obtain the President's attention—is merely the most dramatic and public evidence.

Consider these other examples:

—Secretary of State William Rogers and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird have been caught off guard by some of the most momentous Nixon decisions regarding the Southeast Asian war, in part because of White House fear that their departments can't keep secrets.

—Housing Secretary George Romney, reading the papers while on vacation in Hawaii, learned for the first time that the White House was contemplating deep cuts in his Model Cities budget. He is now back here—"hopping mad" according to a top aide—demanding a face-to-face confrontation with the President before a final decision is made.

— A high Commerce Department official with a pressing question about a vital foreign trade policy problem strove in vain for one whole year to obtain an audience with the appropriate White House staffers.

— A Transportation Department chieftain needing a Presidential yes or no on a plan for preserving rail passenger service was sidetracked so long that he toyed with the idea of stomping into the White House and setting up an electric train to dramatize his frustration.

An Old Complaint

Disappointment over lack of access to a President is nothing new in Washington; a common capital cliche has it that the scarcest commodity in the world is the time of the President of the United States. But Nixon appointees can recite that cliche with unusual feeling—and now that Cambodia and the campus are such overriding concerns, officials handling less dramatic matters can expect to find the President even less accessible than before.

The lack of Presidential attention and the absence of clear policy positions result in frustrated floundering by administrators in such fields as budget and taxes, foreign trade, consumer protection, farm price props, school desegregation, urban improvements and the war on poverty.

Recent weeks have produced some agonizing economic development, ones that presumably should have been receiving top-level attention and analysis. Yet at one time or another four key economic policy-makers—Treasury Secretary David Kennedy, Budget Director Robert Mayo, Commerce Secretary Maurice Stans and Federal Reserve Board Chairman Arthur Burns—were out of the capital on assorted missions in South America. Aides suggested, only partly in jest, that their bosses all figured they would be having no greater impact on policy remaining in Washington than traveling abroad.

Back to the University

Numerous second-level Administration men talk in private about cutting short their service in the Government. One sub-Cabinet-rank official who had expected to have a major role in making economic policy feels sufficiently shut out to be thinking now of leaving by the end of the year, rather than staying the whole four years. Another sub-Cabinet member begins stressing his university's desire to have him back teaching in February; associates are convinced he wouldn't be paying much attention to that deadline if he found his present work more rewarding. Speculation grows that some Cabinet men may quit after November's Congressional elections, if not before.

In December 1968, introducing his 12 Cabinet members to the American people on television, President-elect Nixon promised that "every man in this Cabinet will be urged to speak out in the Cabinet and within the Administration on all the great issues so that the decisions we make will be the best decision we can possibly reach." Yet today only four of those men—Attorney General John Mitchell, Secretaries Laird and Rogers and Labor Secretary George Shultz—are said to have ready access to the boss.

Mr. Mitchell, the bond-market lawyer who managed the Nixon election campaign, wields paramount influence; even the other three sometimes find themselves in the dark about what's on the Nixon mind. Only four days before the President announced the commitment of troops to Cambodia, Mr. Rogers was telling Congressmen such a course would mean "our whole program (of Vietnamization) is defeated." Earlier, Mr. Laird didn't know up to the last minute that the President would announce a decision to pull 150,000 troops out of Vietnam within 12 months; the Defense Secretary kept right on talking almost to the very

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end about 40,000 to 50,000 troops within four months.

In general, frustrated would-be policy-makers concede high regard for the intelligence of the key men around the President. But there's deep resentment and growing concern about what is felt to be his overreliance on them. Besides Mr. Mitchell, the names most mentioned as part of the inner circle are John Ehrlichman, majordomo for domestic affairs; Henry Kissinger, the foreign-affairs counterpart; H. R. Haldeman, who decides which persons and papers get through to the President, and Peter Flanigan, general troubleshooter.

Frequently, however, a Cabinet member can't even penetrate to anybody in this inner circle, let alone to the President himself. White House men confirm that it's quite common for the head of a Cabinet department to be denied an audience with Mr. Ehrlichman and instead be shunted to one of his half-dozen deputies—even though the deputy may be half as old as the Cabinet member and far less experienced.

The official current defense of this procedure seems far removed from Mr. Nixon's December 1968 promise of easy access. "We can't have a lot of Cabinet guys running in to the President," a White House insider asserts, "or he'd never have a question refined to where it's worth his making a decision."

A Neat System

Another Nixon intimate rejects the suggestion that this emphasis on orderly processes denies the President any real feeling for what's going on around him and in the nation at large. Through memos and talks with the top staff aides, he insists, the President gets a very full understanding of what the Cabinet departments are urging. Even more important, this man argues, the present system somehow tends to keep the President from becoming overly preoccupied and immersed in any one problem—"He's not going down to the war room in his slippers like LBJ."

Views may quite legitimately differ, of course, on what subjects are vital enough to warrant speedy Presidential attention and decision. But many Government men complain that the current White House team often fails to recognize how important some matters are.

According to insiders, the "Railpax" plan for passenger service was mired for months outside the President's office, kept there by Presidential aides concerned over the potential budget impact. Finally, to force the issue, frustrated Transportation Department officials leaked a report that the plan had received the Nixon blessing. Some accuse Mr. Ehrlichman of recognizing this pressure attempt and retaliating by holding a decision back still longer. Now an impatient Congress has devised a costlier plan of its own—which the President is expected to accept.

The Commerce Department official (a Nixon appointee) needing guidance about possible expansion of trade with the Soviet bloc says he tried all through 1969 to obtain an audience with Henry Kissinger. He failed, and now others observe that, in the absence of a crystallized Administration position, Congress has done only minor tinkering instead of major "bridge-building" between East and West.

Tax Incentive Plan

The White House staff stalled for almost a year on details of a Presidential proposal for wealthy nations to give tariff preference to poorer countries. In the end, the original plan was approved, but meantime other key nations had impatiently gone ahead with plans of their own, and pessimists here fear it now may be impossible to get everybody in step.

A prime casualty of White House delays is the idea of tax incentives to business for helping solve social problems—training the hard-core unemployed and locating plants in poverty areas to create jobs there. In the 1968 election campaign, Mr. Nixon portrayed this approach as a cornerstone of domestic strategy. Even when the costs and complexities loomed larger and the once-sweeping schemes were pared down to pilot projects, Presidential Counselor Arthur Burns kept the concept alive.

When Mr. Burns moved to the Federal Reserve in February, however, nobody at the White House wanted to take over the idea. Instead, it was handed—without any Presidential guidance, and with instructions to do whatever they wanted—to two unenthusiastic Treasury men, tax policy chief Edwin S. Cohen and Internal Revenue Service Commissioner Randolph Thrower. Predictably, they have let the package languish. "Between Carswell and Cambodia, I doubt this ever came to the President's attention," asserts a disappointed advocate of the tax-incentive approach.

Even at the Budget Bureau, long the all-powerful overseer of Presidential legislative proposals, the aura of cool command is fading. "The bureau was completely in the dark" about a Presidential effort to shape a major piece of labor law, says an official of another agency. "They were asking us who to contact at the White House to find out what was going on."

An Overlooked Matter

White House aides may even be undercutting the Budget Bureau's most basic role—helping slice the fiscal pie. It was after the President brainstormed with his immediate staff that he suddenly decided to sweeten his school desegregation statement with a promise to divert $500 million from other domestic programs to help schools cope with racial problems. Nobody could say precisely where the money was to come from, however, because budget chief Mayo didn't even know of his huge new chore until he read about it in the papers. And the decision as to where the money is to come from still hasn't been made, six weeks later.

While that left-out feeling is perhaps most painful in such traditional Government power centers as the Budget Bureau, it is also demoralizing in less pivotal departments. Housing Secretary Romney hasn't minded admitting that programs to stimulate home-building must remain low in priority until inflation is checked, but he was stung to read while on his Hawaiian vacation that a big chunk of the extra school money was likely to be provided out of his already depressed urban programs.

"That's really an affront to a Cabinet member," observes one Romney aide. Another finds the slight all too typical of that "bunch of whiz kids" at the White House. Besides resenting the way the decision is being made, the HUD Secretary himself views the likely slashes in his budget as fresh evidence of something more troubling: A deep disdain for urban problems among politically oriented men in the White House.

Upstaged by Agnew

The Administration's school desegregation policy still is far from clear to the Government officials who must work in this field, even though the problem has received at least passing Presidential attention. In part, this confusion may stem from the fact that Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Robert Finch, the logical man to handle the matter, has been upstaged by a special White House panel headed by Vice President Agnew, and its workings remain obscure. The panel's staff chief, Robert Mardian, so diligently avoids reporters that down-the-line agencies despair even of learning about policy through the press. HEW's old-line Office of Education is in turn upstaged by Mr. Finch, and reports abound of Commissioner James Allen's early departure.

An Allen aide, Anthony J. Moffett, 25-year-old director of the Office of Students and Youth, announced his resignation just yesterday. Assailing recent Nixon and Agnew statements about young people and campus disturbances, Mr. Moffett said: "The President and his most trusted advisers do not view themselves as leaders of *all* of the American people."

Poverty-warriors in the Office of Economic Opportunity grumble that they face the ultimate embarrassment of a bureaucrat—decisions so sluggish that unspent funds may have to be turned back to the Treasury when the fiscal year expires June 30. The Ehrlichman operation comes in for criticism among HEW's welfare planners, too. They complain that the White House staffers simply don't know enough about the details to make decisions on crucial changes required by the Senate in the President's massive welfare reform plan. Veteran HEW experts would be happy to help, but no one asks. Says one with a shrug: "I guess the White House just doesn't trust us."