

Nixonanalysis

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON—The President has set the antennae of Nixon-watchers quivering by selecting Ron Ziegler to take charge of all outward appearances, Mel Laird to call the shots on noneconomic domestic affairs, and Al Haig to be general manager of the White House.

1. *The Ziegler signal.* (Try saying that fast.) *I know you want his scalp.* The President is saying to the press, *but I have already given you enough scalps,* the press secretary was just as much in the dark about Watergate as the President was, so Ron Ziegler says, and will be more important than ever.

Those who want Mr. Ziegler fired say that he was the unwitting instrument of too much deception in the past and has lost his credibility. Paradoxically, this places the symbol above the substance. A man who passed out false information, thinking it was true, is not a liar; how can his accusers say "no more image-making" in one breath, and in the next, call for the press secretary's dismissal on the grounds that his departure would help the President's image?

In assuming a part of Mr. Halde- man's function, Mr. Ziegler will spend more time with the President and less briefing the press. This imposes a terrible burden on deputy press secretary Gerald Warren, who may then be faced with irate reporters shouting "We want Ziegler!" a chant that does not now spring readily to their lips.

The Ziegler signal, then, displays firmness: The President will permit no reign of terror, and loyalists not involved in Watergate will not face the guillotine.

2. *The Laird signal* on the other hand, is conciliatory. The President is putting up a sign, "politician at work," which is comforting to the Congress, he is saying to conservatives, who have landed on his back far more heavily than liberals, that a centrist who at least sounds conservative will stand astride the flow of domestic legislation; he is saying to the press that here is someone who can press conference you to distraction.

In the '65 Presidential campaign, while flying over Wisconsin, four of United Airlines' most charming stewardesses plaintively offered local cheese to the passengers on Mr. Nixon's plane. There were no takers. Congressman Laird then took the trays of cheese, and drawing his lips back in what friends construe to be his smile, pressed the product of his native state on every person aboard, including the candidate. There were no refusers.

Today, with a lot of what the British call "hard cheese" on his plate, the President has brought a man to his side who knows better than most how to push cheese.

3. *The Haig signal.* The President is

saying that he fully expects to be President until noon on Jan. 20, 1977, come hell or high Watergate.

As everybody who has worked for the President will testify, he is a considerate boss—thoughtful about careers, families and his associates' well-being. Yet he called upon General Haig, whom he admires and respects, to throw away a brilliant military career and accept a dead-end job in the White House. Mr. Haig became the first man to prove he was the best of "good soldiers" by retiring from the Army.

Mr. Nixon would not ask for such a sacrifice if he were not certain of concluding his term on constitutional schedule. No uncorroborated accusations will change that schedule.

4. *The underhanded-overlap signal.* The President's triple play indicates the most welcome development of all: He has made it possible once again for him to have some traditional Presidential fun.

Picture Henry Kissinger or Mel Laird coming into the oval office with a recommendation for the President. "I'd like to say yes, Henry, or Mel," replies the President, "but we didn't ask Al Haig to give up four stars just to be a paper pusher. What does he think?"

And then the President privately calls Al Haig, who used to be Henry's deputy, and Mel Laird's junior, and says, "Look, Al, I've told Henry, or Mel, that the decision is up to you—and it is—but, for your guidance, I think it would be a disaster."

Then the President calls Ron Ziegler to suggest he get George Shultz to call John Connally (who was beaten to a chair at the National Security Council by Mr. Laird) to see if he thinks it's a good idea and if not, to stir things up in the Cabinet, which is more important than the White House staff, or so it is led to believe at four-year intervals.

At that point in time, as they say in witness language, the President strides briskly out of the oval office, walks across West Executive Avenue followed by Monolo Sanchez and a couple of Secret Service men, trots to the steps to the executive office building, goes through the anteroom to his private office, closes the mahogany door behind him, and leaning back against it, has the first good laugh he has had in a long, long time.