

Hickel Faults Nixon on Watergate

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By WALLACE TURNER

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ANCHORAGE, July 5—In the opinion of Walter J. Hickel, President Nixon is responsible for the Watergate scandals whether or not he knew about the acts in advance.

Mr. Hickel, the former Alaska Governor who was the first Secretary of Interior for Mr. Nixon, said in an interview that the President had "created the atmosphere and the attitude for it to happen."

The President dismissed Mr. Hickel in November, 1970, after the Cabinet officer criticized the bombing of Cambodia and

raised questions about the moral tone of the Administration.

"I don't think the Watergate could have happened under Eisenhower," Mr. Hickel said. "He used the staff system, but he used it differently. He understood it."

"I don't think that I know of a Presidency in history that quite operated the way the Nixon Administration did, one that was isolated from the reality of the American public," he added.

'Playing Games'

Mr. Hickel said that by June, 1969, when he had been in Washington for less than six months, events in his dealings with the White House caused him to say to an assistant, "Hey, they're playing games. This isn't right."

His remark referred to undisclosed actions of H. R. Halde-man and John D. Ehrlichman, former Presidential aides, and Egil Krogh Jr., then an aide to Mr. Ehrlichman, Mr. Hickel said. By early 1970, he said, he began to criticize publicly the patterns he saw developing in the Presidential staff.

"I saw them circumvent what I call 'The System,'" Mr. Hickel said. "I think 'The System' is great. Congress can call a Cabinet officer down there and literally chew him up."

This gives the President a source of information by which to judge the nation's attitudes, he said, because members of Congress are reacting to voter attitudes. When Cabinet officers are supplanted by Presidential staff members as the President's main information sources, trouble is bound to occur, Mr. Hickel contended.

Conflicts with the Nixon staff played a major part in his dismissal from the Cabinet, Mr. Hickel said in the interview, conducted in his office overlooking the racing tides of Cook Inlet, and the mountain ranges of central Alaska. He said he was happy to be back in Alaska.

'Analytically Brilliant'

He called Mr. Nixon "an introverted President" who is "analytically brilliant, nonemotional" and said that such a man "makes his decisions on input, and when that input is short-circuited, you're going to have a situation like Watergate."

Mr. Hickel said that sometimes it had seemed to him that President Nixon was Machiavellian in dealings with him. Sources close to Mr. Hickel said that he had in mind his conflicts with oil companies, whose drilling practices it was his duty to regulate.

These sources said that Mr. Hickel had felt that Mr. Nixon was obligated to oil interests for their heavy campaign contributions in 1968, but that Mr. Nixon felt also that it was necessary to limit their actions.

He allowed Mr. Hickel to impose those limits while telling the companies that he could not control the secretary. Eventually, Mr. Hickel was dismissed.

"That approach to government which I call the Machiavelli approach is going by the wayside," Mr. Hickel said. He added that many of those who have governed used to preach to the people the Golden Rule, but they ruled by Machiavellian principles, and they're not compatible."

Mr. Hickel said that almost from the beginning of the first Nixon Administration, the President was constantly about being re-elected.

Disturbed by Expense

Mr. Hickel said that he had been bothered by reports of heavy spending of public funds to improve the Nixon properties at San Clemente, Calif., and Key Biscayne, Fla., for reasons of security.

He said he might feel differently if he knew "all the national security reasons." He added, "But it doesn't appear to me that some of those things would be in the national security interest. I mean \$180,000 or so for rewiring a house. Maybe it shouldn't have been bought if it's that big a risk. It bothers me. I don't have an answer."

Again he returned to his opinion that the staff dominance in the Nixon Administration has produced bad judgment in many things.

"I believe sincerely that no one thought they were doing wrong," he said. "But you create an atmosphere, whereby golly even wrong looks right if you have the kind of mind [that says] by that's the way we're going to go."

Mr. Hickel, who is 53 years old and is a self-made millionaire, said of President Nixon's views on personal wealth: "He always idolized people with wealth and I thought that was a weakness."