

Nixon's Real Advisers-- It's Still a Tight Circle

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Despite the stresses of the Watergate scandal, the White House staff system has remained essentially unchanged: President Nixon, according to insiders, continues to rely largely on the advice of three men.

Before the dismissals of May 30, they were H. R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and Henry A. Kissinger. Now they are General Alexander M. Haig Jr., Ronald L. Ziegler and Kissinger.

Mr. Nixon has begun to meet more regularly with his cabinet and to see a greater variety of members of Congress more often. He is thus less vulnerable to charges of isolation.

DECISIONS

But in making key decisions, the President listens principally to the counsel of a trio of men, as before.

Critics argue that their common trait is obsequiousness; defenders of the administration speak of their loyalty and experience. In any event, all are men whose ideas and work habits are well known to Mr. Nixon — something the President likes.

Neither Ziegler, Haig nor Kissinger has any political background however, and Republican professionals are unhappy at their apparent hegemony. Many of the professionals believe that Watergate was brought on in part by White House "amateurism."

The staff's lack of political seasoning was supposedly to have been corrected by the

arrival of former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, former Governor John B. Connally of Texas and Bryce Harlow, probably Washington's most experienced liaison man between the executive and legislative branches.

But they have not been able to break into the inner circle.

Connally has agreed not to quit immediately, as he had threatened. But he still spends more time in his Mayflower Hotel room, informed sources report, than at the White House. They say he will be gone before the end of the year.

Harlow is just getting started.

START

As for Laird, a former Wisconsin congressman whose judgment of political instincts is respected widely here, even by those who do not share his ideology, the first weeks in the White House have not been entirely successful.

He has said publicly that Mr. Nixon is not taking his advice on Watergate, and that appears to be born out by Mr. Nixon's rejection of Laird's pleas that he make public tape recordings of relevant Presidential conversations. (On Watergate matters, Haig's and Ziegler's views seem more important than those of Leonard Garment, the acting White House counsel, and J. Fred Buzhardt, the special Watergate counsel, according to senior staff members.)

Laird also made a public effort to dispose of Ziegler as press secretary, which appears to have failed completely.

Ziegler's promotion to the inner circle — he sees the President constantly, even during the occasional evening cruises aboard the yacht Sequoia — has astonished many Washington observers. He was Haldeman's protege, and when Haldeman went into eclipse, many expected Ziegler to leave, too, especially since he had been the administration's point man in denying Watergate charges that have since been proven true.

Instead, the young former advertising man, who has no substantial experience in domestic or foreign policy or high-level administration work, has been called to the President's side in a moment of crisis.

After a brief initial period when he made a substantial effort to be accessible to the press and other outsiders, Haig has become almost as difficult to see as was Haldeman in his heyday. He also appears to have just as much power. But, according to others on the staff, he is neither as imperious nor as abrasive to subordinates as his predecessor.

The continuation of the same basic system apparently results from the personality and work habits of the President himself. One of the staff holdovers, who a month ago was predicting radical changes, said last week, "the man thinks he works best that way, relying on relatively few close advisers, so obviously that's the way we're going to work."