

The last of the

By Grace Bassett
Examiner Washington Bureau

SAN CLEMENTE — The last of the Richard M. Nixon loyalists, Ron Ziegler at 35 has followed Nixon into temporary exile along a walled off beach of San Clemente to do his "duty" as he sees it for his discredited chief.

The two men need each other.

For Nixon, Ronald Louis Ziegler is a living, breathing reminder of the climb to power, the command over a nation. Ziegler went with Nixon all the way from Disneyland to the top of a teetering palace guard at the White House. He was still press secretary and presidential assistant when Nixon resigned.

Now with a loyalty more binding than his disappointment, Ziegler is the unlikely volunteer attempting to dignify the Nixon reign in history and to rescue the Nixon family from debt.

"This a very strenuous, difficult period," Ziegler concedes in the isolated office compound outside the gates of the Nixon's Villa Pacifica.

"It is not a time of great joy."

For Ziegler, Nixon was the main chance. Ziegler took it and dedicated 15 years of his life for a moment of glory and power beside his chief. Now he needs both a job and recuperating time.

He grew fast from that twinkling boy with pale blue eyes, who, at 20, warned sightseers in a Disneyland jungle boat:

"Not the alligators. Please keep your hands inside the boat. They're always looking for a handout."

Along the way, the long lasting assistant may have lost his credibility for a lifetime.

If so, it probably is because Ziegler yet refuses to admit his President has done anything morally wrong.

"He made mistakes. Any man does," says Ziegler without touching the question of right and wrong.

"I'm disappointed. Of course, I'm disappointed," says the same Ron Ziegler who four weeks earlier when asked flatly, "Are you convinced the President is innocent of the Watergate coverup?", replied, with a steady eye:

"Yes, I am. I have talked with President Nixon many times in all kinds of circumstances and I have never talked to the man whose voice is on those tapes."

Ziegler's disappointment is that he had expected his President to survive, not that he's lost faith in the man. Ziegler longed for Nixon to persevere. But he will not say whether he switched with other Nixon aides and urged resignation that first week in August.



loyalists

"My disappointment doesn't mean his decision was not one I support," Ziegler goes on, his negatives dropping as from a black cloud over the villa where occupants have quit playing national roles but not yet found themselves.

Ziegler seems unable to call his employer "Mr. Nixon" or "Dick" and he can't say "Mr. President." So the former President becomes simply "Him."

Ziegler, with his beauteous assistant, Diane Sawyer, and Steve Bull, another Nixon aide, are spending most of their time trying to arrange the transfer of Nixon's records — and tapes.

Don't count on anything not happening to Ron.

Nixon's friends, Robert Abplanalp and Bebe Rebozo, never thought much of Ziegler's public relations.

Ziegler never liked the soap business.

As a press secretary, he must be graded on a different standard from his predecessors. He was the first to work for a man who distrusted and generally disliked press people. "I've seen the hate in their eyes," Nixon told his cheerleading Rabbi Baruch Korff.

Nixon, not the press, was responsible for Ziegler's \$42,500-a-year salary, nearly twice as much as many of his news critics make. The man's boss, at least, was satisfied.

But who can use the major apologist for the decline of Richard Nixon is the big question mark of Ziegler's future.

"I think I have an obligation to put down some of what's happening," Ziegler says.

He isn't about to betray the President by writing his own Watergate whodunit.

In the recent dazzling past, Ziegler has been addressed as "his excellency" in Jordan. He has discussed U.S.-Soviet detente in Moscow.

Ziegler, in short, has become aware of his own footnote in history. He'd like to expand it into a history book.

"My situation is different from many who've been in my position or more responsible ones at the White House," he explains.

"Most men — most men and women," he starts again, observing the interviewer, "move into these positions from a lifetime of observing leadership and power. They work up in the process.

"I found myself not because of any education on prior professional achievement being thrust into this situation.

"I'm only 35 and I've talked with De Gaulle, Tito, Brezhnev and Pompidou."

In the Azores, Ziegler's companions were the new president of France, D'Estaing, and General Spinoza, the new president of Portugal.

Just what he said to world leaders is anybody's guess.

But Ziegler may well understand the inner workings of Nixon's mind better than any other man.

He drank coffee with the President in the mornings at the White House.

They reviewed the day. They talked about what was on each other's mind.

"I don't have a depth of historic reason or wisdom. I guess I have experienced quite a bit for a young man. And somehow the point of view I expressed helped him."

When Chief of Staff Alexander Haig was maneuvering Nixon's resignation, and Secretary of State Kissinger fidgeted over Nixon's inattention to foreign policy, Ziegler kept helping Nixon isolate himself.

Ziegler even locked the White House press room — with newsmen and women inside — so Nixon could stroll on the lawn one last time, out of sight.

If Nixon lived in a dream world his last days in office, it was Ziegler, more than Haig, Kissinger or any cabinet member, who understood his dream.

"An awful lot of good things happened in those 5½ years," Ziegler explains.

"I have a responsibility to see that the Nixon records are handled in a dignified, appropriate way. We owe that to history."

Ziegler won't say whether Nixon has requested the tapes, of his White House conversations or if he plans to sell them or give them away. But millions of dollars are obviously at stake in that decision. And Ziegler is bound to be deeply involved.

He has pushed back planning for his own future until a "former President's office is established and a lot more of the Nixon presidency is moved out of the current White House."

Until then, Ron makes only small stabs at becoming his own man.

He thinks about writing a book.

He watches his weight, down 30 pounds in the last two months in the White House.

He rides a motorcycle.

He searches for a cheaper apartment than the Surf and Sand hotel suite at Laguna Beach where taxpayers used to pick up the presidential press secretary's tab.

They are little shows of independence, for Ron Ziegler still belongs to Richard Nixon.

If he doesn't know right now where he is going, he knows where he's been — at the center of tumultuous power and its destruction — and where he came from — hard working, get-ahead people in Covington, Ky.

Whatever happens to Ronald Ziegler, will flow as much from his mysteriously steady rise during Nixon's descent under Watergate, as from Ziegler's all-American boyhood.

"I'll need to take some time," Ziegler predicts. "But I look forward to a good career. There are lots of opportunities."

One associate sees Ziegler as the future manager of a Nixon-Abplanalp-Rebozo trust.

Another said he's perfect for vice president of Procter and Gamble, where Ziegler started as a salesman and his wife as a secretary.

"One place he'll never be, for sure, is the news business, a broadcaster proclaims. He's blown his credibility."