

Cutting Back the White House 'Palace Guard'

How far President Ford really intends to deroyalize the presidency depends on his reaction to a private proposal to slash the White House palace guard, both in its swollen numbers and special privileges.

The proposal from a former Nixon aide, plus several others, is now under scrutiny by the Ford transition staff, headed by Ambassador Donald Rumsfeld, Robert Hartmann, Mr. Ford's influential longtime aide and new counselor, has recommended drastic staff reductions. Mr. Ford tends to agree.

Nevertheless, skepticism among Ford partisans persists whether this President will be any more resolute than others in draconian reduction of his own staff.

What makes this so important to Mr. Ford is the persuasive contribution on the royalized presidency to Watergate and the disgrace of Richard M. Nixon. Grand Rapids Ford is plainshoe midwestern, but even his presidency will retain imperial trappings if he keeps a huge White House staff isolated from the citizenry and inevitably made arrogant by the perquisites of office.

The former Nixon aide making the proposals believes that in normal times any President will always be exposed to the public. It is, then, only the staff that can truly be isolated from the real world. When the staff is elephantine and dominates the entire

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federal bureaucracy as in the Nixon years, the effect can be deadly.

Thus, the former aide's proposal calls for a drastic reduction in the presidential staff, 540 today compared with 250 when Mr. Nixon took office. Although reduction is by far the most important element in the plan, he proposes these changes for those who remain:

(1.) Limit the normal working day to 12 hours, five days a week. That would end the 7 a.m.-10 p.m. work day, six days and often seven days a week, that were standard during the Nixon administration. Anybody working less was stigmatized as a shirker. Hence, the Nixon aides' horizon was bounded by the four walls of his White House office.

(2.) Require every aide to get out of Washington and visit the U.S.A.—whether Hagerstown, Md., or Los Angeles—at least once every six months. Failure to comply would require a written explanation.

(3.) Sharply reduce the physical size

of the White House mess (presently seating 32), status symbol of presidential aides where prestige compensates for bland cuisine—perhaps turning it into a buffet-style lunch counter. That would encourage some aides, who never leave the White House to eat outside several times a week, perhaps even on Capitol Hill with the peoples' representatives.

(4.) Close down the White House barber shop. "If these guys can't get off their butts once a month to go get their haircut like everybody else in the world, it's too damn bad," says the former aide.

(5.) Strictly limit the use of White House limousines to senior aides—perhaps no more than ten—compelling the President's men to join their fellow Americans behind the wheel fighting rush hour traffic.

The deroyalizing spirit is congenial to at least one member of Mr. Ford's four-man transition team who is making a point of dialing his own calls

from the White House. "It is a humbling experience that I recommend to the President's staff," he told us.

Moreover, a reduced staff at the Ford White House fits both the new President's idea of restoring policy and operations to cabinet-level departments and deemphasizing his own staff. It also comports with his own firm ideas of a deroyalized presidency.

But skepticism stems not only from precedents of past Presidents but Mr. Ford's own record. When he succeeded Spiro T. Agnew as Vice President, He kept the staff at a swollen 60.

There is, furthermore, something about the White House atmosphere that encourages royalism. Bob Hartmann, a tough old ex-newspaperman without a visible royalist bone in his body, held a very low opinion of the title of "counselor," a pretentious and faintly Europeanized cabinet rank created by President Nixon. Yet, when Mr. Ford quickly named former Rep. John Marsh of Virginia his first cabinet-level counselor, insiders say that Hartmann would accept no less for himself and now boasts the title, "Counselor Hartmann."

That was merely an early skirmish, ending in a minor victory for royalism. The more meaningful test is President Ford's reaction to this laudable and overdue proposal to cut the palace guard down to size.