

A Classic Washington Story

Behind the Sawhill

Washington

John Crittenden Sawhill figured his job might be in jeopardy the first week President Ford was in the White House last August.

The 38-year-old federal energy chief had called Mr. Ford on Tuesday to ask for an appointment, heard back on Saturday but wasn't invited over to the White House until almost two weeks later.

Then when Sawhill arrived at the Oval Office, he got his second clue that something might be amiss.

Instead of just the President he found Treasury Secretary William E. Simon, Interior Secretary Rogers Morton and a Domestic Council aide named Michael DuvVal, a holdover from the

Nixon White House two years younger than Sawhill.

"It was not the kind of meeting John had been hoping for," one of Sawhill's best friends recalled the other day, just after Sawhill was fired last Tuesday by President Ford. "He never got a chance to discuss his own situation with the President."

To hear his friends and colleagues tell it, Sawhill's standing in the Ford administration was downhill from then on.

It took less than three months for Sawhill to become the first major casualty of the Ford administration and the story of those three months could be viewed as a classic tale of Washington politics — petty and silent infighting, political inexperience up against political acuteness, and outspoken independence against team play.

Part of Sawhill's trouble began before Mr. Ford became President. The Nixon White House regarded him as something of a freak, a man who volunteered his own financial statement and who publicly vowed to Congress that he would not defect to the oil or energy industry he helped to regulate.

Both moves won warm praise for Sawhill on Capitol Hill — the Senate confirmed him 87 to 4 on June 18 — but brought worried phone calls from the White House.

When Sawhill succeeded Simon last April as head of the Federal Energy Administration, he quickly put in a tough standard-of-conduct rule, even forbidding FEA employees to accept a free lunch from industry people.

Sawhill began recording and publishing the gist of conversations he had with lobbyists, something he did at the urging of Common Cause.

Sawhill's moves were jumped on by his antagonists, who now included



JOHN SAWHILL
He saw the handwriting

aides in the Treasury and Interior Departments as well as the White House.

After Mr. Ford became President on August 9, many Nixon holdovers sniped at Sawhill in front of Mr. Ford and his top aides.

Other federal energy officials resented Sawhill. They accepted Simon because Simon had been handed the energy czarship by Mr. Nixon, but they felt that with Simon's move to Treasury and the end of the Arab oil embargo the czarship might now be up for grabs.

Toward the end of last summer, there was talk around town that Sawhill was not a good manager. "He doesn't know how to delegate authority," went the talk. "He doesn't even have a deputy."

Sawhill won't talk about some of the criticism directed at him, but he gladly responds to the whispers that he wouldn't hire a deputy. Sawhill said that in the middle of May he gave the White House as his candidate for deputy Arch Edwards, a Princeton classmate of his who had gone on to Harvard Business School and had been "extremely successful" as a consultant.

Ouster

"Edwards should have been very attractive to them since he was a conservative, from Oklahoma and knew the oil industry," Sawhill said.

"But the White House sat on that appointment for a month, and then when I told Edwards to forget it they tried to push a couple of political appointments on me which I just couldn't accept."

Finding a deputy last summer was apparently impossible, with the White House so beleaguered by Watergate.

Sawhill's political inexperience did him no good this fall when the high price of imported oil was worrying the White House as much as any other economic issue.

Sawhill made speeches saying that the only way to curb oil imports was through mandatory conservation, like a gasoline tax. He began pushing the same suggestions inside the administration, and when Mr. Ford made a speech not rejecting the gasoline tax Sawhill took it as a sign that the White House agreed with him.

The same week, Sawhill was a guest on NBC's "Today" show and he strongly advocated a gasoline tax. He had misread the President's trial balloon on the gas tax, because a few days later Mr. Ford came out against it.

"I think Sawhill's 'Today' show appearance was viewed inside the White House as pushing Ford too far toward conservation at a time when the President was beginning to determine otherwise," said one White House source. "If there was a straw that broke the camel's back that was it."

If there was one man who broke Sawhill's back, to hear some insiders review

it, it was Interior Secretary Morton.

When the Federal Energy Administration was created under Simon, one of the first things Simon did was to pull the Office of Oil and Gas Policy away from the Interior Department.

Simon also took three of Interior's best men. Eric Zausner, Steve Wakefield and Duke Ligon. Morton didn't like it, though he reportedly never told Simon or Sawhill. But he did tell others, including Melvin Laird.

Mr. Nixon's departure and Mr. Ford's arrival boosted Morton's stock at once. Morton and Mr. Ford are friends from their days as Republican leaders in the House. Mr. Ford still slaps Morton on the leg at a cabinet meeting.

Less than a month ago, Mr. Ford made Morton the energy czar by making him chairman of the Energy Resources Council.

He appointed no deputy and Morton asked for none. Sawhill went to see Morton, told him he would support him and get the FEA to serve as staff to Morton.

Morton was unresponsive, which Sawhill took as a sign that he might be on his way out.

Mr. Ford met for 20 minutes with Sawhill on Friday, October 25. Sawhill told Mr. Ford that he honestly thought he behaved in ways that he (Mr. Ford) often behaved, frankly, honestly and outspokenly.

Sawhill said he felt he had acted in a way that "supported Ford's style."

Mr. Ford was non-committal and Sawhill offered his resignation, not fully expecting it would be accepted.

It was and Sawhill's days as energy chief here ended.

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