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Mollenhoff Goes as He Came: By Surprise

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WASHINGTON, MAY 31 — Resident Nixon's muckraker in residence, Clark R. Mollenhoff, is leaving the White House staff the way he joined it—with a raft of unanswered questions in his wake.

The announcement yesterday that the 49-year-old special counsel to Mr. Nixon will return in July to the Washington staff of The Des Moines register and tribune came barely nine months after he switched from investigative reporter for the paper to personal investigator for the President.

Officially, as Mr. Mollenhoff explained in his letter of resignation, the chance to become the newspaper's bureau chief was "too good an opportunity to let slip by."

There were, nonetheless, reports that Mr. Mollenhoff had encountered some on-the-job frustrations. And his resignation occurred as he was embroiled in a series of controversies that some felt were embarrassing to the administration.

The sudden departure left unexplained whether an administration that was the first to acknowledge for the record that it had a full-time private investigator on the White House payroll would see fit to continue the practice after Mr. Mollenhoff leaves.

Inside Information

And the resignation raised the question whether Mr. Mollenhoff might take with him to his old office in the National Press Building some information he had gleaned by being inside the White House.

"Clark is a very enterprising fellow," said A. E. Heins, managing editor of The Register and Tribune, when a reporter asked if he believed Mr. Mollenhoff had picked up any secrets. "I hope that in everything he does, he learns something," the editor added.

According to Mr. Heins, Mr. Mollenhoff was in line to become the newspaper's Washington bureau chief before he left last year for the White House. After he was on the job, "I guess he just reappraised the situation," Mr. Heins said. "Clark does that all the time."

Announcement a Surprise

As in most of his endeavors, Mr. Mollenhoff's announcement was a surprise. It raised the question—"why?"—just as it had been raised among his colleagues last August, when he decided after 28 years as a scourge of bureaucrats to become a bureaucrat himself.

This was the same Clark Mollenhoff who had detected scandals in Government offices, enraged Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson with his hard questions, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1958 for uncovering labor racketeering and proclaimed in dozens of speeches and four books the need for journalists to keep public officials honest.

But once on the job in Room 140 of the Executive Office Building, surrounded by files and listening to a stream of confidential complaints from departmental tipsters, Mr. Mollenhoff appeared as suited to hard digging on the inside of government as he had been on the outside.

He blocked efforts within the Administration to release James R. Hoffa, the ex-president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, from a Federal prison, where Mr. Mollenhoff's reporting had helped send him.

Mr. Mollenhoff obtained the resignation of Mr. Nixon's new chief United States marshal,



Associated Press

Clark R. Mollenhoff

retired Army Maj. Gen. Carl C. Turner, and saved the President some embarrassment, after learning that a Congressional subcommittee was about to implicate General Turner in military club profiteering.

When Senator Joseph Tydings, Democrat of Maryland, protested an unusual maritime permit to a company once connected with another Presidential aide, Peter Flanigan, the permit was suspended swiftly. Authoritative sources credited Mr. Mollenhoff.

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Sources on Capitol Hill said that on more than one occasion Mr. Mollenhoff had prevented the appointment of an individual who might later have proved to be a discredit to the Administration and to the country.

Some officials—not all Democrats—and others who had known him for a long time expressed concern that Mr. Mollenhoff was becoming politically zealous. His defense of the ethics of Mr. Nixon's unsuccessful nominee to the Supreme Court, Judge F. Haynsworth Jr., struck many as partisan, though Mr. Mollenhoff denied it.

Opponents of the Haynsworth nomination contended that Mr. Mollenhoff's lobbying was so vigorous that it cost the President votes—to which Mr. Mollenhoff replied that his explanations of the judge's financial dealings had in fact saved some votes.

Democrats protested when Mr. Mollenhoff confirmed that he had access to Federal income tax returns, although knowledgeable reporters were aware that previous Administrations had peeked at the records too. The difference, they said, was that nobody talked about it before.

Called Security Tight

As it was, Mr. Mollenhoff maintained that security on the nine records he had seen was tight (he had to sign for each one) and others reported that the Special Counsel's check had cleared at least one individual of a charge of wrongdoing.

Reports that Mr. Mollenhoff was investigating charges that the Columbia Broadcasting System had doctored television news reports raised the suspicion that it was related to a scoreboard the Administration is said to keep, which listed C.B.S. as the network least consistently favorable to Mr. Nixon in its news programs.

All the same, there were no signs that Mr. Mollenhoff was covering up anything occurring under Mr. Nixon. Senator John J. Williams, Republican of Delaware, who is himself an ethics watchdog, said he knew that Mr. Mollenhoff had a Presiden-

tial guarantee that "he would not be held to looking just at previous Administrations."

Mr. Mollenhoff first became interested in journalism when, as a youngster playing American Legion baseball in Iowa, he started following the career of a Des Moines radio sportscaster named Ronald eRagan. He covered sports for the Lincoln High School newspaper in Webster City, Iowa. ("It was," Mr. Mollenhoff recalled recently, "the only time I ever had a conflict of interest.")

The moral outrage that fuels all investigative journalists was instilled in Mr. Mollenhoff while he attended Webster City Junior College, where he first read "The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens," the life story of the premier muckraking reformer of Teddy Roosevelt's era.

"Rather naively I yearned for the days of Lincoln Steffens, and rather naively I believed that the journalistic forays of Lincoln Steffens and the political thrusts of Teddy Roosevelt had eliminated most of the corruption in America," Mr. Mollenhoff later said. "I must admit I was more than just a little elated to discover that there was still a few dishonest public officials left to chase."

'Fraud and Favoritism'

By 1965, Mr. Mollenhoff was concerned enough to write, in a book entitled "Despoilers of Democracy":

"Fraud and favoritism are sapping the strength of America's democracy. Politics and plunder are wasting billions of tax dollars. Unwarranted secrecy combined with superficial press coverage distort or hide many governmental decisions. Big Government and the big lie threaten and too often overwhelm those men who seek no more than honest government and truth."

About a decade ago, Mr. Mollenhoff advanced another suggestion: That no President can keep his Administration honest unless he has on his staff an investigator, devoid of any personnel, policy or political responsibilities, who has carte blanche to poke under the rocks where bureaucrats hide their sins. He suggested as much to John F. Kennedy in 1960, but the late President did not heed Mr. Mollenhoff's advice.

On Nov. 2, 1968, as Richard M. Nixon flew over the Southwest in a chartered jet, Mr. Mollenhoff approached him to say: "It looks like you're going to be it. I don't know if this should be congratulations or otherwise, because it carries a heavy responsibility." He made the same suggestion he had made to John Kennedy. Mr. Nixon won the election and last August hired Mr. Mollenhoff.

As Miss Ethel Swanson, who taught the only journalism class Mr. Mollenhoff ever attended, at Lincoln High School, said last week: "He's made for that kind of work."

The reasons for Mr. Mollenhoff's decision to leave the White House after less than a year in the \$33,500 job are not clear. He will become an executive on the newspaper for which he had worked since 1941.

Collision With Mitchell

Early in his White House tenure, Mr. Mollenhoff ran afoul of Attorney General John N. Mitchell for examining Justice Department records without the Cabinet member's prior approval or a clearance from John D. Ehrlichman, assistant to the President.

Mr. Mollenhoff still insists that he had, as the philosophy behind his job demands, ap-

proval to investigate anyone without prior clearance. How else, he and Senator Williams reason, could a President be protected from an errant Cabinet member or even a top assistant? They recall the case of Sherman Adams, who was President Eisenhower's closest aide and who left the White House amid a public scandal.

But at the Justice Department, officials scoff at Mr. Mollenhoff's reassurance and say that his top security clearance gives him the right to accept records, not to demand. Friends of Mr. Mollenhoff report as well that he has been stifled in attempts to get records elsewhere in the Administration, that officials, as one investigator put it, "cover things up when they know Clark is looking."

Both Mr. Mollenhoff's letter of resignation and the President's acceptance "with regrets" stated that there were no pressures involved in the investigators's departure.

But unanswered was whether the role Mr. Mollenhoff had served—an official assigned full-time to examine potential wrongdoing—would be filled with a new appointee. A White House spokesman said yesterday that someone in the Administration would continue to perform the task, but could not say whether it would be under the same conditions that Mr. Mollenhoff had obtained.

Senator Williams emphasized, in a coincidental interview last week, that "if Clark left the [White House] they'd need another man on the job tomorrow."

Mr. Nixon assured Mr. Mollenhoff in a letter that he knew the reporter-turned-detective-turner-reporter would "call them as you see them with regard to the Nixon Administration."