

Hickel Rift With Nixon Deeper; Resignation or Dismissal Seen

By E. W. KENWORTHY JUN 13 1970
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WASHINGTON, June 12—The relationship between President Nixon and Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel has deteriorated to the point where there is widespread speculation here that Mr. Hickel will soon resign or be dismissed. Reports from Capitol Hill indicate that his successor may be Fred J. Russell, whom Mr. Nixon named Under Secretary of the Interior last March to replace Russell E. Train, who had been appointed chairman of the new Council on Environmental Quality.

Close associates at the Interior Department, when interviewed today, did not attempt to hide the fact that the White House had not gone out of its way to close the breach opened by Mr. Hickel when he wrote a letter of complaint to Mr. Nixon on May 6. Mr. Hickel said then that the Administration was not sufficiently concerned with the attitude of young people and was thus con-

tributing to their sense of alienation.

In several ways, these informants said, the White House has made plain its displeasure with Mr. Hickel and has gone out of its way to humiliate him publicly.

The latest occasion, they pointed out, occurred yesterday, when Mr. Hickel did not appear at the White House for a meeting with Mr. Nixon and a subsequent press briefing on proposed legislation within his jurisdiction. The bill would cancel 20 Federal oil leases in the Santa Barbara Channel, the scene of the massive oil leak in January, 1969, and create an 18-by-20-mile Federal marine sanctuary in the area.

It was Mr. Hickel, according to officials in his department and several legislators most directly connected with the oil spill, who originated the idea of canceling the leases to pre-

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serve the coastline against future spills.

It was also known that Mr. Hickel expected to be at the White House for the announcement, and his department had prepared a press release on the bill.

However, according to sources on Capitol Hill, the Secretary received a call from the White House yesterday morning and was told not to appear. The press release was never issued.

When asked about the White House action today, one Interior Department official said, "The reasons for the maneuver I don't know. We found out yesterday that he wouldn't be there. The plans changed."

Reported Deeply Hurt

It was said that Mr. Hickel was deeply hurt and angered by the White House order not to appear for the occasion.

According to some sources, Mr. Hickel was similarly "disinvited" to attend religious services in the White House East Room soon after he sent his letter.

Close associates of Mr. Hickel would not confirm the rumors about his imminent departure. But neither did they characterize the rumors as without any foundation, thus discarding the usual practice of a subordinate when reports circulate that his chief intends to resign under pressure, or be dismissed.

One Interior official who has Mr. Hickel's confidence, when asked whether the Secretary intended to quit, replied, "I have nothing to substantiate that."

When asked whether he

thought the President would request Mr. Hickel's resignation, this aide said, "I don't know. My feeling is strongly no."

When the same questions were put to another aide, equally close to the Secretary, he said, "I don't know. You tell me."

Some officials expressed today the view that Mr. Hickel would not resign under this kind of pressure but would force the President to dismiss him, if Mr. Nixon wanted him out of the Cabinet.

Mr. Hickel has seen the President privately only once since he sent the letter — late on the afternoon of May 28. Afterward Mr. Hickel said that the discussion had been chiefly about department business, although the question of the young had come up but not in the context of his letter, which he said had not been mentioned by the President.

One official said today that Mr. Nixon suggested in this meeting that Mr. Hickel run for his old job of Governor of Alaska. It was said that Mr. Hickel pointed out that the filing deadline was June 1, and that it would look bad if he filed in the primary against Gov. Keith Miller, his former Lieutenant Governor.

Graceful Departure Doubted

This official said that Mr. Hickel's reply was tantamount to telling the President, "If you want me to go, you'll have to fire me."

"I don't think he's going to walk out gracefully," this official said.

Mr. Hickel has lost several battles with the White House. He had strongly urged, for example, that his department be made a "department on the environment," with responsibility for all antipollution pro-

grams, including those of other departments and agencies.

The White House not only rejected this proposal but accepted instead the recommendation of the government reorganization commission, headed by Roy L. Ash, for establishing an independent agency on environmental protection. Mr. Train of the environmental council supported the Ash plan.

To this new agency, Mr.

Hickel's department would have to surrender some of its responsibility