

Watergate divides Nixon 'family'

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WASHINGTON—Despite the facade of monolithic harmony in President Nixon's re-election campaign, a potentially grave fissure has opened between senior administration officials and the White House staff over the handling of the Watergate scandal and its aftermath.

Thus, it was no accident that at a very high level, hush-hush campaign meeting for the President's surrogate campaigners—nearly the entire cabinet plus other Republican superpowers—the Watergate affair was brought out on the table for the first time by White House political aides.

Opened by Nixon

29 Oct

The command performance last Sunday morning was opened by the President himself, but he soon turned the proceedings over to John Ehrlichman, White House domestic policy chief. With top presidential aide H. R. "Bob" Haldeman listening, Ehrlichman gave members of the cabinet their first exposure to the White House view of the pyramiding charges of political espionage.

It was high time. For months top officials of the administration—operating beyond the Haldeman-Ehrlichman-Berlin Wall that protects Mr. Nixon from all outside pressures—have been seething over White House insensitivity to the political reality of the espionage charges.

Half-baked denials

Worse yet, the surrogates campaigning nonstop in the real-life world have been reduced to mouthing half-baked White House denials whenever asked on the campaign trail about the embarrassing Watergate scandals. Those questions are coming much faster, as the issue continues to build.

With White House political operatives

and the President himself doing what they can to bury the scandals until the election is over, some cabinet members have privately complained about a credibility gap between themselves and the White House.

As one told us: "The meeting on Sunday was the first time anyone in the White House had deigned to mention Watergate to the surrogates. I'm not blaming the President, but I am blaming some of his cavalier staff who think they can manipulate and manage everything."

A deepening fear

Behind that view, shared by several other top-level administration officials, is a deepening fear that the Watergate bugging and other charges of political espionage will deaden the impact of the big victory now within Mr. Nixon's grasp. Criminal proceedings in the Watergate case plus the Senate investigation by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy now quietly under way, they fear, will undermine Mr. Nixon's mandate before he even tests it.

Moreover, these high-level officials are convinced that the Republican party—their party—is doomed to suffer drastic consequences for years to come from the political wheeling-dealing of the President's White House operatives.

Ehrlichman was pointed in his explanations. He said it was difficult to "prove a negative," meaning that the White

House could not deny every charge of paid espionage until all the facts were in.

He dealt briefly with charges that Haldeman had direct access to a special cash fund of several hundred thousand dollars for political dirty tricks kept in the safe of Maurice Stans, finance director of the Committee for the Re-election of the President. Since that accusation had been based on an alleged statement by Hugh Sloan Jr., the committee's now-resigned treasurer, and since Sloan's attorney had formally denied it, Haldeman was obviously in the clear, Ehrlichman said.

Secret night sessions

He ridiculed charges that Dwight Chapin, the President's appointments secretary, had any involvement with sabotage operations against the Democrats. Impossible, said Ehrlichman, because Chapin was totally preoccupied arranging Mr. Nixon's journeys to Communist China and the Soviet Union and had no time for politics. In fact, however, Chapin attended all the secret Monday night Nixon campaign strategy sessions that started around the first of the year; Ehrlichman failed to mention that.

But neither Ehrlichman nor Haldeman (who said nothing during the Sunday morning meeting) struck the note the audience wanted to hear: instead of pussyfooting around the charges, the White House should long since have met them head-on with, at the very least, a pledge to clean house.

Thus, while the White House finally responded to the President's own official family, the explanations by Ehrlichman scarcely narrowed the fissure that—now more than ever—splits the White House staff from the party's most respected leaders in the cabinet and beyond it.