

Embattled White House

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, June 5—A handsome tall young Marine stands outside the door of the White House Executive Office these days, sweating in the early summer heat. But inside, the White House reception room, with its grandfather clock and its portrait of John Adams and its telephone that doesn't ring but chimes, is quiet and cool.

Everything seems threatened here now, but behind the White House iron fence everything is calm. Julie Nixon Eisenhower's picture book on her father lies on the reception room coffee table, full of smiling pictures of happier days; but down the corridors, new men are established at the old desks, talking about new approaches to the public business.

Behind the closed doors, one imagines that Len Garment, the President's new counsel, is watching, with others, the Watergate Senators on television sorting out the Gemstone papers, and trying to figure out who is Ruby One, Ruby Two and Crystal. But meanwhile the White House is trying to save the falling dollar and to reorganize itself.

Some things are changing here behind the television screen. John Connally of Texas is now in temporary residence in the White House Executive Office, concentrating on the economy rather than on the Watergate, invisible but very much alive at Cabinet meetings and in the President's Oval Office.

Elliot Richardson, the new Attorney General, is beginning at last to talk like an Attorney General, defender of the law and the Constitution, rather than defender of the President.

In his first press conference as Attorney General, Mr. Richardson did not excuse the "plumbers" who burglarized Dr. Ellsberg's psychiatrist's files and the Watergate, or try to jus-

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tify illegal acts on the grounds of "national security," or rule out the possibility that the President might have to testify about the scandals, or support the White House security apparatus, or even proclaim the President's innocence. The evidence was "inconclusive" on the President's role in all this, he said, and this is obviously a big difference.

Meanwhile, the burden of rebuilding the White House staff has been left to Gen. Alexander Haig, the handsome, 48-year-old former deputy to Henry Kissinger and now Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army, whose previous combat experience in Korea and Vietnam will probably come in handy.

Under the President's instructions, he is now arranging regular Cabinet meetings. The Cabinet, which for the last two years has been almost nonexistent, has met for between one and two hours every Friday for the last three weeks. The White House staff is being instructed, or so it is said, to serve as a transmission belt between the President and the Cabinet, rather than dominating and instructing the Cabinet, as it did in the Haldeman-Ehrlichman days.

There have been more meetings between the President and the Republican leaders on Capitol Hill, and between the President and the leaders of both parties in Congress during the last month than in the previous three or four months, and it is said that these have been candid "discussions," more frank and even pugnacious than ever before in President Nixon's time in the White House.

Also, there are new rules for filling the many vacant jobs in the executive branch of the Government. The political and ethnic qualifications of the past four years are said to have been dropped, and appointments are now being made on the objective basis of experience and ability.

The problem of the White House and the newspaper and television reporters is also under study, though it is still unresolved. Ron Ziegler, the President's press secretary, who is under attack for misleading the press on Watergate, is apparently going to resign or be transferred to another job. He is a symbol of past troubles, not necessarily of his own making, but anyway he is too vulnerable and too visible, so the indications here are that he will have to go—either home or somewhere else.

General Haig has his own personal problems, again not of his making. He has had a spectacular rise in the Army hierarchy, and has finally achieved an Army officer's dream with its stars and its house and base in Washington's opulent military compound; but he is probably going to have to choose within the next few weeks between his Army career and his new political assignment, and the guess here is that while he would prefer to go back to the Army, he will probably decide to stay at the White House—and fairly soon.

None of this, of course, will mean much if the President cannot overcome his political difficulties. The Watergate is still dominating and crippling the Presidency, and adding to the President's economic problems, but he is moving and changing as best he can.

The new men and the new methods in the White House are preparing new economic policies and getting ready for the visit of Chairman Brezhnev of the Soviet Union later this month, but no matter what they do, they are still overwhelmed by the torrent of Watergate news.