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Regrouping at the White House

"The longer I'm here the more the President will like Haig and dislike me."

That blunt comment about President Nixon's chief of staff, Alexander Haig, was made to Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News by President Nixon's chief political counselor, Melvin Laird. In manifold ways it announces the crazily divided character of the post-Watergate White House.

The basic fact is that Watergate has severely eroded President Nixon's personal authority. As Mr. Laird's crack indicates, independent men all over government are now venturing forth on their own. The result is a battle royal inside the White House.

One group of advisers, centering around Laird, is disposed to bend the President in the direction of accommodation to the rest of the government. Another group, including the old advisers and centering now around Gen. Haig, is trying to reassert Mr. Nixon's merest whims over the government. The clash between the two approaches has surfaced in several important episodes.

The first example of this division showed up on the matter of a deadline to end American bombing in Cambodia. Laird was sensitive to congressional pressure for a cut-off date. He negotiated with leaders of the House an arrangement that would have suspended American bombing in Cambodia on Sept. 1.

But the President kicked at the idea of any deadline. Gen. Haig and Henry Kissinger, the chief national security adviser, backed Mr. Nixon up. The White House made a special effort in the Congress to do away with the deadline. The Congress, enraged, finally forced agreement on an Aug. 15 deadline which applied to all of Indochina, not just Cambodia.

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A second example is the recent flurry of rumors about the possibility Dr. Kissinger might replace William Rogers as Secretary of State. Apparently the President is disposed to make the change. But Mr. Laird and the men around him favor a move only if Secretary Rogers agrees.

Not so the eager apostles of presidential power. They floated through a series of White House correspondents the rumor that the change would take place in the fall. They even got the New York Times to believe that Mr. Rogers was telling friends he wanted to step down in the fall.

Any illusions on that score were shattered by an angry dispatch from Tokyo where Mr. Rogers was attending a joint Japanese-American cabinet meeting. The dispatch, by Keyes Beech of the Chicago Daily News, quoted a State Department official as saying that the source of the rumors about Rogers stepping down was Dr. Kissinger. The official said that Kissinger wanted the State Department job to get out from under Watergate and did not have the guts to ask the President directly.

Phase IV of the program for meeting

inflation provides still another example. Economists in the Federal Reserve Board and other parts of government favored some tax action to sop up purchasing power and make price controls more workable. Mr. Laird was disposed to push that approach in the White House.

But he never really got a chance. Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz and Herb Stein of the Council of Economic Advisers were cool to new departures. At one point briefing of the President was done by the man least disposed to rock the boat—Gen. Haig. The predictable result was a weak program totally in line with the President's ideological prejudice against new taxes and controls.

The slugging match that now racks the administration can obviously not continue for very long. Something will have to give, and the odds are that Laird will probably be forced out in the near future.

But the odds are not long. For Laird cannot be shoved out easily. If he goes he will go in a way that could easily push the President even further down the road to impeachment.

Whatever happens to Laird, moreover, the latest scrapes underline a continuing point about the Nixon White House. H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, the departed aides so much scorned now, are not the ultimate villains of the piece. It was not their paranoia, their contempt for others, their insistence on 300 per cent loyalty to total presidential prerogative which led to Watergate. They only did what Richard Nixon wanted them to do. They are gone, but the President is developing the same qualities in the new staff being built up around Gen. Haig.