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and Robert Novak*

Gen. Haig's White House

The Watergate crisis transformation of President Nixon's White House staff has signalled a change from the total Haldeman-Ehrlichman domination at the top into a loose federation of division heads under Gen. Alexander Haig's overall direction and growing influence.

But while power at the White House has been fragmented, Mr. Nixon shows signs of sticking to old habits in facing this historic crisis of government. He obviously prefers to spend more time with Chief of Staff Haig and Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, both new to high national politics, than the seasoned Melvin R. Laird and Bryce Harlow. Haig and Ziegler, though lacking the Haldeman-Ehrlichman power monopoly, resemble those departed lieutenants in being far less likely than Laird to confront the President with unpleasant recommendations.

The new arrangement, wholly unique in Richard Nixon's presidency, was clearly evident in the condition of employment laid down by Laird when he reluctantly agreed to join the White House staff as domestic counselor. In conversations with Haig, Laird rejected involvement in Watergate.

It is unlikely Laird intended his self-imposed limit as a signal he wanted to steer clear of the Oval Office except on domestic policy legislative questions. Yet, Laird has not been given anything approaching the access to Mr. Nixon enjoyed by his predecessor as domestic chief, John D. Ehrlichman.

In short, Laird has become the operating divisional head for domestic policy, period. Whereas Ehrlichman's role as intimate presidential adviser spread-eagled all political and ideological issues, Laird's scope is strictly limited.

This limit on Laird has enhanced the role of Haig, just transferred from the Pentagon with concepts of a brilliant staff officer carrying out the wishes of his chief. By steering clear of Laird, Mr. Nixon will avoid the kind of blunt advice that has always irritated him. Indeed Mr. Nixon rejected key recommendations from Laird during his first days as domestic chief. Old Nixon-watchers feel that even in this crisis the President is maintaining his antipathy toward advisers who actually give advice.

In any event, there is no doubt of the accretion of power in each of the major White House operational divisions.

The President's new legal staff, headed by ex-law partner Leonard Garment, now has independent authority John W. Dean III never had. Likewise, William Timmons, chief White House lobbyist, enjoys a new autonomy. Roy Ash, head of the Office of Management and Budget, has also, in words of one White House insider, "been expanding his perimeter"—and may soon bump into Laird's operation.

While power has thus been scattered in the White House, Ziegler has been jockeying to replace Haldeman, not in power but as the White House aide closer than all others to Mr. Nixon. "Ron doesn't care about the power of being close to the President," one presidential aide told us. "He wants the



Gen. Haig with the President.

form of Oval Office entree, not the substance."

Ziegler alone of the old Nixon staff emerged from the Watergate scandals with prestige publicly enhanced by the President (who elevated him to "assistant to the President").

With his two most intimate aides gone, Mr. Nixon has taken to spending literally hours with Ziegler, whom he treats like a son. When Laird publicly suggested Ziegler's standing with the press was so low he should be removed as the President's spokesman, Mr. Nixon personally authorized a flat contradiction in the President's name.

But while Ziegler has the intimacy, it is Haig who now appears to be the most formidable influence with the President. Haig reminds old friends that he didn't give up his brilliant military career to "shuffle papers" as chief administrative officer in the White House.

Haig ended a potential struggle over control of White House personnel on his own terms, rejecting proposals from Laird and others that all Watergate-touched aides be dismissed in the President's interest, whether directly guilty or not. Haig has ruled out the firing of these old Haldeman-Ehrlichman aides, so long as they perform well, as a "moral issue," and the President has clearly backed him all the way. Ziegler, too, is protected on the "moral issue" basis.

Clearly, the man to watch in the dangerous aftermath of Watergate is not Laird and certainly not Ziegler, but Haig. While Haig does not even seek to concentrate power in the Haldeman-Ehrlichman manner, the question not yet answered is whether his advice to the President will be better than theirs.

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