

Finally, A Little Good News

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Aug. 23 — With the appointment of Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State, there is now virtually a whole new Cabinet and top White House staff moving into place here, and what is probably more important, they are bringing new attitudes to their work.

The transition from the old to the new is far from complete. It takes time to master the complexities of the great departments of Government and sort out new personalities and routines in the White House. But something interesting, and maybe even important, is happening here in the aftermath of Watergate.

It is all on the surface so far. The essential policies of the Administration are the same. The defensive and even deceptive arguments are the same. In short, the Administration is backing into the future, and clouding its movements as it goes, but it is moving.

The tight and secretive little power center in the White House is gradually dispersing into the departments and agencies. Gen. Alexander Haig, H. R. Haldeman's replacement, Mel Laird, John Ehrlichman's successor as the President's Assistant for Domestic Affairs and Kissinger, the President's principal adviser on security affairs, are now coming out from behind the White House screen.

After the President's first televised press conference in over a year, General Haig was available to talk to the press about the background of the President's problems, Mr. Kissinger

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followed with a press conference promising to open things up and be available to questioning by the Congress, the press and the critical ideas and suggestions of the public.

In these melancholy days of contention and confrontation, even if the fundamental questions of the past have not been resolved, these tentative symbols of change, and maybe even of reconciliation, may be even more important than the President's arguments that he was right all along, and if he wasn't, it was somebody else's fault, and anyway, was no worse than what other Presidents did in the past.

Everybody in Washington now, including the President, says we must "learn the lessons of Watergate," and some people have. Most of the new key Cabinet members are showing a new independence, and this is an important lesson.

Vice President Agnew is in deep trouble. He is fighting for his political life, and he is fighting on his own. He is not asking the President whether he can have a press conference to argue his case. He is "informing" the White House what he intends to do, and doing it in his own way.

Similarly, the new Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, is not asking the President or the Vice President whether it's all right to inform Mr. Agnew that the Vice President is under investigation for criminal activity, but telling them this is a fact and putting Mr. Agnew on notice.

This causes trouble between the Attorney General and the Vice President, who goes on public television to denounce the leaks out of the Justice Department, but at least the struggles are not being concealed or directed by a White House staff out of the President's control.

These emerging changes of attitudes, assumptions and power centers in Washington may be more important than anything else. After all, it was probably the Administration's mistrust or fear of dissent that led to the centralization of power, the secrecy, the conspiracies and the Watergate tragedies, but at least there is now a change of tactics, if not a change of heart.

The New Nixon team in Washington is now urging the President that he has more to gain by talking out than by hiding out in Camp David or Key Biscayne or San Clemente, that he gains more by facing the reporters than by evading them, and that he will be better served by trusting and liberating his Cabinet and his White House staff than by controlling and intimidating them.

He has either seen this point on his own, or had it imposed on him by his advisers and by his troubles, but, in any event, he is no longer in a position to impose his will on a frightened and obedient staff.

His aides, consciously or unconsciously, now seem to be acting on the assumption that they can serve him best by insisting on the powers of their offices, by asserting their independence to tell him the truth, and by offering to leave and tell why if he doesn't like it.

Maybe nothing has changed in policy or the President's arguments about the war or Watergate, but everything has changed in the minds of most of his new aides. They are asking for more freedom. At least some of them are insisting on doing what they think is right, and he seems to have got the point.

This is an important change. The President needs his Cabinet and his staff now more than they need him, and though gradually and grudgingly, he seems to be accommodating himself, as he did to China and Russia, to a new approach to the realities.