

WXP Post
NIX AD
New Openness

Haig Policy of Accessibility Pervades White House Staff

By Lou Cannon

Washington Post Staff Writer

On a sunny morning during President Nixon's recent California trip, a mocking note was anonymously tacked to the bulletin board of the White House press message center.

"At this point in time," the note said, "the President is probably somewhere within the state of California although we can state this only to the best of our recollection."

On the same day, while White House spokesmen were declining to give information about the President's drive down the San Diego freeway, presidential chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. was meeting with a small group of reporters at San Clemente.

In a manner both affable and responsive, Haig an-

swered questions for an hour on the President's priorities, the economic and legislative issues facing the administration and the reorganization of the White House staff.

The Haig meeting, one of 20 he has held with reporters both in Washington and San Clemente, is symbolic of the new White House policy of access sometimes referred to as "Operation Openness."

As defined by Haig himself, the cornerstones of this policy are decentralization, strengthening of the role of the Cabinet, institutionalization of foreign policy and greater access to all levels of the administration.

Within the White House, See OPENNESS, A10, Col. 1

OPENNESS, From A1

this policy is widely regarded as an implicit recognition that President Nixon knows he was far too isolated in the pre-Watergate White House and too dependent upon top aides H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman.

One aide says that Mr. Nixon is still suspicious and even hostile to the press, a viewpoint reinforced by the President's comments at his two recent news conferences and by his refusal to allow spokesmen to provide the news services with the usual information on his whereabouts during his recent San Clemente visit.

At the same time the President is described as being determined to resume a public role despite what he described last week as the "leers and sneers" of television commentators and the criticisms of the writing press.

The presidential re-emergence in speech and press conference has encouraged the attitude of openness favored by Haig and by White House counselors Melvin R. Laird and Bryce N. Harlow. It also has triggered a formal change of policy about access to high administration officials.

Under the new policy White House staff members and Cabinet officials have agreed to make themselves regularly available for interviews. The appointments are usually arranged by Deputy Communications Director Ken W. Clawson, who personally solicited every reporter at San Clemente for interviews with White House officials.

Haig himself saw more reporters in a single week than Haldeman had during his entire four years at the White House.

Cabinet officials have issued explicit instructions that reporters are to have direct access to themselves and their subordinates. Probably the most explicit instruction was contained in a recent memo to assistant secretaries and agency heads within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare from HEW Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger.

"Working with the press to answer their questions and to explain government activities is a major responsibility of management," the Weinberger memo said. "Accessibility of officials di-

rectly to the press rather than through an elaborate public affairs structure is imperative."

The Cabinet itself seems to be far more valued under the new Nixon administration than it was under the old one. Haig says he wants Cabinet officers to be able to view a White House staff member as "a friend in court rather than an obstacle or bottleneck of any kind." Expressions of Cabinet independence are now proclaimed rather than suppressed, and the President himself took pains to point out that Secretary of Labor Peter J. Brennan had favored the minimum wage bill that Mr. Nixon vetoed.

One tangible expression of Cabinet importance is the appointments process, where the White House in many cases no longer insists on its own personnel choices.

"In 80 per cent of the cases, the Cabinet officer's choice is approved," says White House personnel director Jerry H. Jones. "Frankly, the way we're operating now, the Cabinet usually prevails if there's a difference of opinion."

The White House personnel operation is described by Jones as "completely recovered" from the slowdown and backlog in unfilled appointments that followed the Watergate disclosures and the resignation of Haldeman.

There are now 37 vacancies in the 520 executive-level jobs (federal grades 1 through 5), and, of these, all but 15 have actually been decided and are awaiting announcement.

Jones says that top-level businessmen, lawyers and professional people still want to work for the Nixon administration, despite Watergate.

"We're getting quality people," he says. "Successful, able people feel they owe a stint of service to their country. You can't sit out there and mouth about bad government unless you're willing to help correct it, and most people are."

Jones' job has in some respects been made easier by Watergate. He says he is not under pressure from major financial contributors who would find "this an extremely inappropriate time to put on pressure." And he gets along well with Haig, who is readily accessible and "sometimes knows

about my problems before I do."

This access within the White House which the personnel director cites may, in fact, be the most significant aspect of "Operation Openness."

The taciturn, hard-driving Haldeman was to many White House staffers nearly as inaccessible as the President himself. And, like Mr. Nixon, he preferred to receive communications in writing.

"Bob was a memo man and Al is far more verbal," says one holdover staffer who worked well with both men. "Haig likes to talk things over before he recommends a decision."

Another staff member says that Haig has as much of a temper as Haldeman and doesn't hesitate to express himself if he thinks he is receiving insufficient information.

"The difference is that Haig doesn't hold grudges," says one aide. "Nor is he trying to build fences inside the White House."

Haig said as much in some of his meetings with reporters while he has responsibility for setting up presidential appointments. Haig insists he doesn't try to screen out anyone the President should see.

"I'm no wallbuilder," he says.

What Haig is, unquestionably, is the No. 1 presidential aide in the reorganized Nixon staff. The 49-year-old former four-star general has emerged as the leader of the so-called "Big Six" group of counselors.

This group of senior staff members, which attempts to hold regular weekly meetings, includes Haig, Laird, Harlow, counselor Anne Armstrong, Office of Management and Budget Director Roy L. Ash and Henry A. Kissinger, Secretary of State-designate.

Mrs. Armstrong, who says she was determined not to become "the house woman of the Nixon administration," has emerged in this group as a skillful and highly regarded politician. She is the administration's liaison with state Republican organizations and has not hesitated to bring the sometimes critical views of state party leaders to other White House officials.

Laird and Harlow are recognized by the President—and by Haig—as the administration's reigning experts on congressional relations.

Four other White House staffers are sometimes invited to these "Big Six" meetings. They include Secretary of the Treasury George P. Shultz, congressional liaison man William Timmons, assistant for international affairs Peter Flanigan and presidential assistant Ronald L. Ziegler.

Ziegler is the most prominent holdover in the Nixon administration. He is, in effect, a communications director while retaining his title as White House press secretary.

But Ziegler is under instructions to leave the daily White House briefings to deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren. Privately, Ziegler has expressed regrets that he is no longer allowed to do the briefing and some bitterness toward reporters who he believes hold him responsible for giving out inaccurate information about White House involvement in Watergate.

However, Ziegler continues to enjoy access to the President and is considered likely to stay on in his unofficial communications director role.

Haig discounts reports that the White House staff has realigned itself along new factional lines with himself and Ziegler on one side and Harlow and Laird on the other. Reports of

such a struggle he puts down to "Washington mythology" eager to find neatly defined factionalism in any administration.

In fact, the evidence seems to suggest that there is frequent give-and-take and many different alignments from issue to issue in the present, more open Nixon administration.

Haig, Laird and Harlow have in common long public careers, willingness to explain their views to the press and suspicion that there are not many easy answers.

"None of them are lawyers," says a White House aide who dislikes what he considered the "legalistic" approach to issues of John Ehrlichman and John Dean. "All are experienced and all are men of substance."

Despite this new openness, however, the traces of inaccessibility and hostility remain. This has been frankly recognized by Laird, who said in a recent interview with National Journal reporter Dom Bonafede that "the problem that we need to solve in the White House is still to move toward greater openness, greater conversation and more confrontation . . ."

The fact that the White House is moving in this direction has encouraged Laird, who was reported to be leaving only a few weeks ago but now has told friends that he intends to remain in the administration.

The President himself sometimes seems of two minds about the new direction of his administration. Haig has said that the new policies he is carrying out reflect the direct desires of Mr. Nixon.

But when Mr. Nixon was asked at San Clemente to provide routine information about his plans to the news services, he reportedly replied that it was "none of their business."

The ultimate success of Operation Openness may depend on whether Mr. Nixon's personal view of the press or his public need prevails.