

Ken Cole: Nice Guy Finishing On Top

By William Gildea

"When the Watergate business started to break, I kept holding my breath," said an acquaintance of Ken Cole's. "If his name had shown up, I think I would have lost faith in mankind. You know he's the All-American type, a nice guy."

Ken Cole's name never did appear in connection with Watergate (in fact, his name seldom appeared in connection with anything) and there followed a deep exhaling by at least one person, still bullish on the human race.

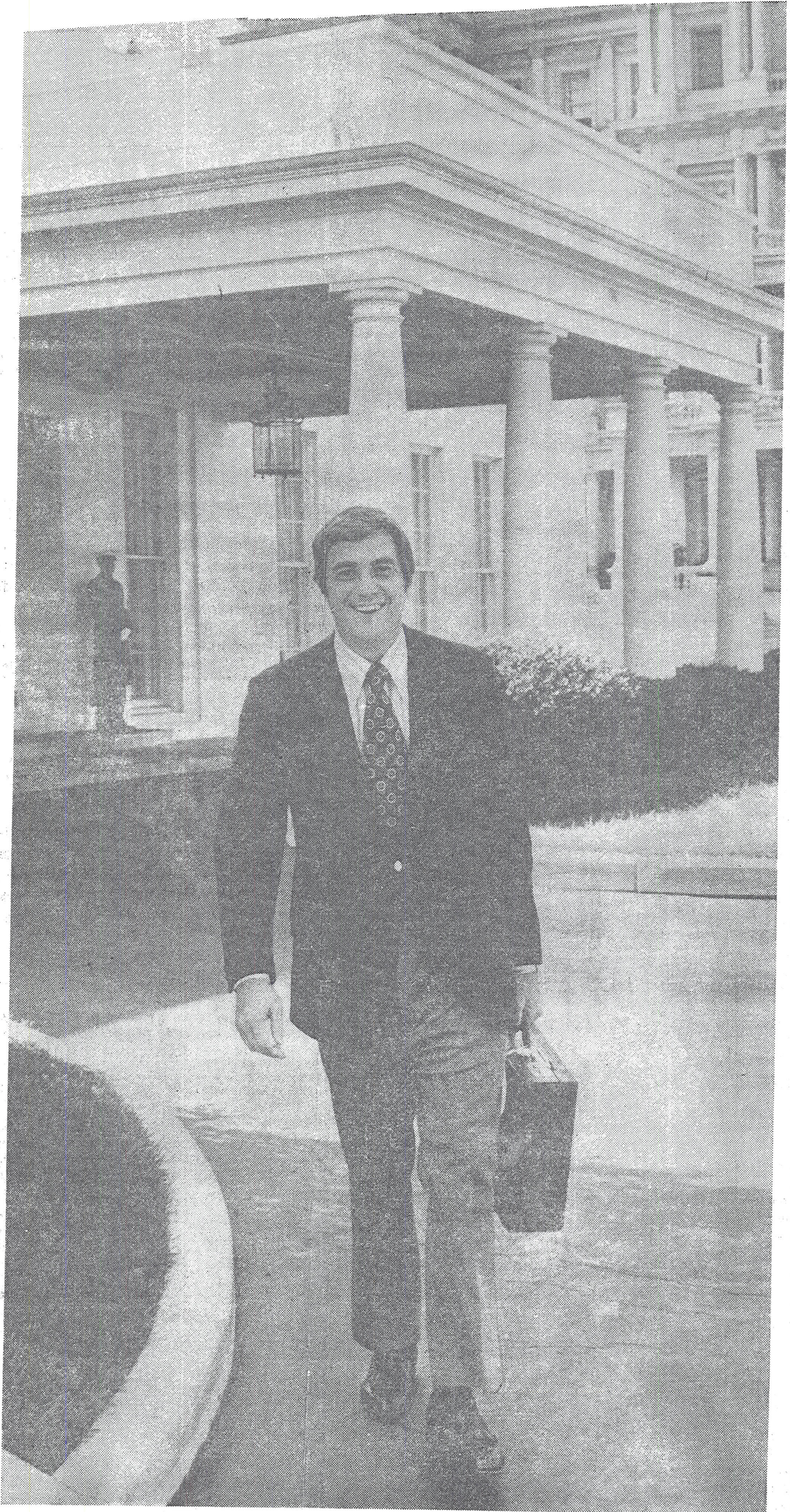
A long-time top aide of John Ehrlichman and close friend of Dwight Chapin, Cole has survived Watergate unscathed so far and surfaced recently as part of a small group of men with easy access to the President. Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Alexander Haig, Roy Ash and Ron Ziegler, all familiar names hold the title of Assistant to the President. So does Ken Cole.

If you've never heard of Ken Cole, you're not alone. Just a year ago he responded by letter on behalf of the President to a Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee telegram to Mr. Nixon.irate committee member William Proxmire pointed out that Mr. Nixon did not respond personally, adding furiously, "Instead, he called on somebody named Cole whom I've never heard of before."

Yet, all the while, Cole, whose business is domestic affairs, was moving up steadily in the White House hierarchy as others faded away, many in large trouble. Recently his ascent has accelerated until now he sees the President "on what averages to be once a day," sometimes up to four times a day by his own count. He was named Assistant to the President last month in addition to his duties as Domestic Council executive director, which he inherited from Ehrlichman a little more than a year ago.

See COLE, H3, Col. 1

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By Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post

The shifting location of Cole's office in relation to the Oval one reflects his new stature. Three weeks ago he worked out of a sun-filled corner suite in the Old Executive Office Building. Marble fireplace. Color television. A room so large that a sofa and three ample matching chairs fit in almost unnoticed.

Hard to improve on indeed, unless you're moving to the smaller but more prestigious quarters in the West Wing of the White House. Which is where Ken Cole could be found recently. Occupying the desk that was once Ehrlichman's and then Melvin Laird's, he sported a fresh Florida tan he'd gotten during travels with the boss (as usual, Cole's name appeared in almost no news accounts of the President's trip).

Because he is relatively obscure, relatively young at 36, and because he directs a Domestic Council (a group of Cabinet members and council staffers) shrunken from 75 in Ehrlichman's heyday to 27, Cole is sometimes written off as no great influence around the White House. Others say that remains to be seen, that he does good work with little fanfare and has demonstrated a staying power that could leave him in position for Mr. Nixon to rely on even more in his tough times.

As to whether the Domestic Council possesses the authority it once did under Ehrlichman, Cole says, "It does, and possibly it doesn't." In the sense that it does, that he is, in fact, where Ehrlichman and Laird once were, Cole adds firmly, "I am the President's assistant for domestic affairs. I am at this point in time on the White House staff." So there.

To those who say he lacks the experience to be Mr. Nixon's top aide on domestic affairs, Cole says, "I questioned my experience myself when I thought about doing this job. Then I came to the conclusion, after talking with many people, that I have more experience doing it than anybody in the country. I'm starting my sixth year here in the White House. I doubt many others have this kind of experience.

"Obviously, I'm younger than a lot of people would like me to be, but still, I've had those five years."

Cole's job is to present the President "with every possible option" on all domestic matters. Far more conciliatory in tone than Ehrlichman, who ran the Domestic Council with little feeling for the Cabinet and Congress, Cole says, "I want to work with the Congress and get legislation passed and make people's lives better."

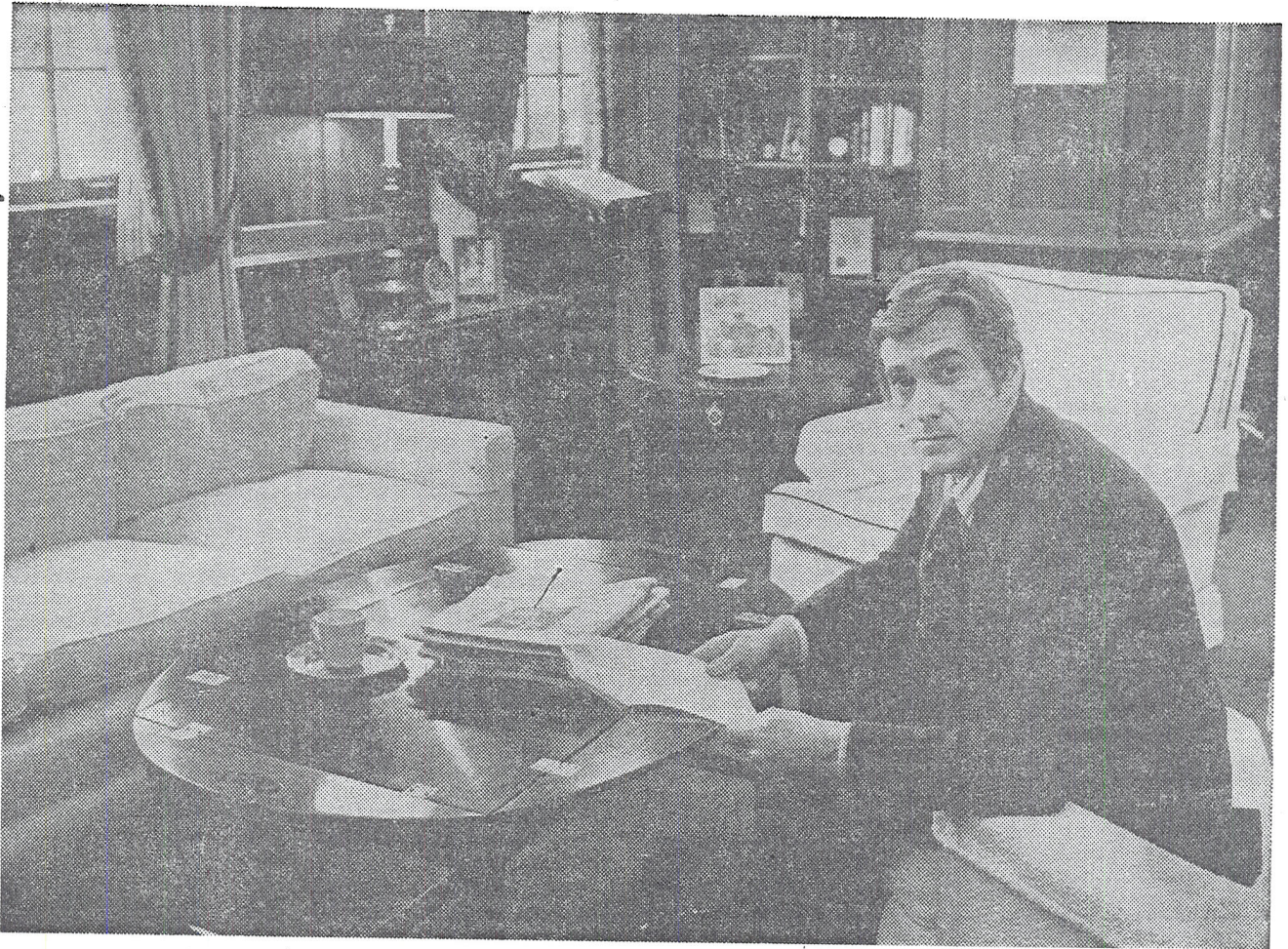
Also unlike Ehrlichman, who centralized power on the Domestic Council, Cole says he is trying to return much of the responsibility for developing domestic policy to the Cabinet members, viewing himself as a funnel to the President. "I coordinate and manage projects," he said, listing as top domestic priorities an elementary and secondary school education bill, a community development bill, and health care proposals.

Cole also views himself as the newest spokesman for the President. He expects to hit the road making speeches on Mr. Nixon's behalf—he started recently in Phoenix — and probably rightly envisions much hard work. "Well, look, it's not easy to do," he says of his new job. "Am I looking forward to it? Yeah."

In what will no doubt be proven an accurate prediction, he says simply becoming known will be "one of the hazards" of his work. A sample of his feelings: He "believes very strongly in the things" the President is doing, calls former boss Ehrlichman "a very warm person" with a "super sense of humor," and says of Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman, "I have the same high regard for both of them."

He says he has talked with Ehrlichman "three or four times" since his departure, adding, "I inquire as to how he's getting along. Unfortunately, I haven't talked with him as much as I've liked to. I do think about him a lot."

The current problems of his friend Chapin have been a painful experience for Cole. He says he talks to Chapin fairly regularly on the phone, their wives talk to one another, and that they are very close. "Dwight tells me he is innocent of



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the charges, Cole says. "I believe Dwight is innocent of the charges. Whatever I can do to support him and his family, I'm going to do."

Cole admits the atmosphere around the White House is not what it once was in pre-Watergate days. "It's a lot happier to work when you're not under attack. I can't help but say that."

But, sounding something like the President himself, Cole adds he will not be diverted from his domestic duties by all the Watergate-related troubles. "We've set some goals and that's what I've got to work on. When I think of what we can get accomplished, that keeps me ginned up enough that even under attack I don't have a problem."

And as for anyone he might encounter in his travels who should happen to attack the administration, he issues this stern warning: "I just want 'em to know who I am when they do. Let's not go about it indirectly. I'm

ready for whatever comes."

If Cole sounds tough, he doesn't exactly look it. He doesn't have Ehrlichman's dominant personality. His boyish locks and frequent laugh reflect his wife Marilyn's appraisal of him as "not a yeller" and "very even-tempered." He dresses as casually as the job allows: a red sweater over his white button-down shirt and tie one day, a gold turtleneck another.

Nor would the sight of him early last year strike much fear in anyone. He came down with chicken pox—"He was covered from head to foot; he was a mess," Marilyn Cole said—and the spots on his face stubbornly refused to disappear for weeks.

Cole is effective for a number of reasons. He works long hours. Like most young men who have surrounded Mr. Nixon, he's highly intelligent. And he's apparently always faithfully followed orders and dis-

charged his duties as perfectly as possible, no small factor in his advancement.

Cole's sister Priscilla, registrar at Finch College in New York, called him an "underachiever" in college, where he was about a C-plus student, saying, "I've heard that he was tested and found one of the brightest children to enter the Scarsdale (N.Y.) public school system."

Around the White House, indications are that he has been quick to agree with his superiors and carry out their wishes.

"Back in 1972 the President said, 'I want to cut back the number of staff people in the White House,'" Cole recalled. "I said, 'Fine, I'll cut my staff by 50 per cent.'"

Cole also said he found both Haldeman, whom he worked for briefly in 1968 as staff secretary, and Ehrlichman "easy to work for." This may have been partly because he was doing it their way, and well.

"They set very high standards of performance for themselves and those who worked for them," Cole said. "As long as you did your work, you didn't have a problem."

No question, Cole worked. "The first year it seemed hard to get his attention," said Marilyn Cole one day recently in the sun room of their five-bedroom home in the Bethesda community of Sumner.

There, she said, they lead "a totally basic, common life, like anyone else." She plays bridge every other week and takes an art course. He likes to play golf at Kenwood whenever possible. They have two daughters, Corinne, 8 and Megan, 5.

Cole grew up, the oldest of four children, in the well-to-do suburbs of Scarsdale and later Westfield, N.J., where he met his wife. They began dating their junior year at Westfield High and she attended Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pa.,

partly because he was only two hours away at Bucknell.

Cole experienced precisely no difficult times before his junior year at college. Then his father, an independent management consultant at the time, "ran out of money" during the economic downturn of 1958.

Cole dropped out for a semester and got a job as a pipe fitter and gas appliance repairman. Based on this experience he says, "I've seen how a lot of people other than myself live. I've worked in the ghetto of Elizabeth and crawled around with the rats and worked under other people's houses on my back."

But not for long. He returned to Bucknell (where he is remembered as social chairman of his fraternity (Sigma Alpha Epsilon), this time with a sharper sense of responsibility.

"I had a little bit better than a C average, but not much, when I was coasting through on my father's money," he said. "When I was trying to finish on my own, I got B's."

He caught up to his original class and graduated in 1959 by attending extra classes and summer school. He then rejoined the Elizabethtown Gas Co. as an assistant to the vice president for operations, then as a customer service field supervisor with a 60-man staff. A naval officer from 1961 through 1965, Cole extended his tour to become executive officer of a ship with a crew of about 250. "I would have taken executive officer of a row boat," he said.

Back on shore, his career followed even more neatly the pattern of other young men who have served Mr. Nixon. He joined the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency where he handled the Scott Paper Tissue Co. account. And there he met Chapin, who suggested he inquire about working for Nixon.

"I honestly think I would have been happy to sweep the floor," Cole said. "I'd always been an admirer of Richard Nixon's." He began answering political mail two nights a week in 1967 and the next year joined the campaign full-time, among other things directing 40 advance men.

In Washington, said a former White House colleague,

"It was very apparent very soon that whatever he was dealing with he knew the details." Said another who has worked with him: "He's not brash, he's not going to get on the tube and make a lot of predictions. He's not dynamic. He doesn't need to be. He's very prepared and precise."

Most notably, he apparently escaped Watergate. "There's no question about his honesty," said a former Small Business Administration official who knows him. A former White House associate added, "There's no reason to think he knew anything about plumbers and the rest. He's not the type to be fussing around in somebody else's business."

John K. Andrews Jr., the former White House speechwriter who recently called for Mr. Nixon's resignation or impeachment, added, "Ken Cole's nature is such that this kind of cloak and dagger business and political hardball is foreign to him."

A source said that Cole has had to "survive a good deal of in-fighting" to get as far as he has, adding that Ash, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, "would have been happy to see Ken plowed under."

Unlike those with political ambitions, Cole need not hurry to disassociate himself from the administration. To the contrary, by staying on and getting done whatever he can, Cole is viewed by others as brightening his future in business.

"If I had a big company," one observer said, "I'd make him senior vice president in charge of operations."

Rep. Tom Steed (D-Okla.) recalls Cole appearing last year before his House Appropriations Subcommittee to defend the Domestic Council budget.

"He was talking about something kind of new," Steed said. "New ideas that would eliminate a lot of duplication in areas that were overlapping. He saw the Domestic Council as sort of a clearing house."

"I was favorably impressed with him, as with anybody who levels with you. He answered all the questions without a lot of yik-yak. He's a very articulate sprout."