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Game-Plan Government

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Nov. 23—Everybody is reshuffling the Nixon Administration Cabinet, including members of the Nixon Administration Cabinet and the kind of White House officials who eat breakfast on a background basis with political reporters. The very air of the capital city is vibrant these days with reports of "changes in the game plan"—new programs, new approaches, new rhetoric, even new above-the-battle statesmanlike images for Mr. Nixon and Vice President Agnew.

It all sounds remarkably like a sales department planning its new fall line, or maybe a network program department lining up shows for next year's prime time. Seldom if ever has an entire Administration thought out loud, so much and so frequently, about the face and the costume it is going to present to the voters.

During the Kennedy Administration, a single report by James Reston that the President planned a fruitbasket-turn-over in his Cabinet set off a political hue-and-cry that postponed the whole exercise for months. Later, President Johnson used to cloak any change in his official family in the kind of secrecy usually reserved for overseas commitments and C.I.A. capers.

It is almost refreshing, therefore, to find Mr. Nixon's insiders discussing the pros and cons of Cabinet members as one might a piece of horse-flesh or a used car. Secretary of the Treasury Kennedy, for instance, has so variously and often been described by Administration colleagues as a dim bulb that it is a wonder he does not walk out on them in a huff.

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But it is all a little unseemly, too. Mr. Romney is not imperiled at H.U.D. for failing to get rooftrees up but for angering some all-white suburbs. Mr. Hickel is not being handed his hat for anything that matters at Interior, but for telling the President the truth last spring. Mr. Stans, although the White House had to relieve him of the task of negotiating a textile agreement with the Japanese, and although he is off the reservation on the trade bill, is reported to be in no trouble at all.

Besides, the Cabinet minuet is being presented not so much as a means of surrounding the President with more effective aides but of providing him a new set of players to fit some revised game plan. The unfortunate fact is that administrations are made in the White House and not in the Cabinet departments, and Mr. Nixon's problem is not so much to bring on new faces (although that seldom does any harm) as it is to provide leadership and example in getting at those problems that may yield to government.

Can that be done through any kind of game plan which has at its center only the limited purpose of re-electing Mr. Nixon in 1972? The Administration's remarkable revelations about economic policy are not reassuring.

There is nothing much to know about the economy in November that was not visible in October; the annual rate of inflation has dropped to 4.2 per cent but no one contends that inflation is, therefore, no longer a serious

problem—not with the kind of wage settlements being reached at every hand. The only real change is that the economy may have hurt the Republicans in the 1970 election—there is not even any strong proof of that—and the White House is anxious that it not do so in 1972.

Hence, the word is leaking from every seam and pore of this contrived Administration that economic policy is going to change—the deficit is going up and the interest rates are coming down and if all goes well by the middle of 1972 maybe unemployment will be down from the present 5.6 per cent. The White House press secretary even says on the record that the Nixon policy of "disinflation" must give way to the "next phase," which sounds rather like reflation and which suggests the probability that by 1972 nothing really substantial will have been done about inflation or jobs.

What seems missing in this kind of game-plan government is an over-all vision, a consistent purpose, no matter how flexibly served. What kind of men does Mr. Nixon want around him? What is his real economic concern? Where and what does he wish the nation to be at the end of his stewardship, and how does he plan to communicate his goals to those who must follow him?

Maybe a new game plan and a few new faces will supply some answers but the Administration might itself pause in its game playing to recall Attorney General Mitchell's early admonition to judge it by "what we do, not what we say." The American voter might do just that.