

Watergate: The Future

Marked Shifts Are Expected in Ways White House Pursues Key Policies

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By R. W. APPLE Jr. APR 24 1973
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WASHINGTON, April 23—Much of the comment about the Watergate case centers on retrospective questions: Who knew of the plan? Who approved it? Who covered it up? Definitive answers will not be available for months, until the investigations and trials have been completed, and perhaps not then. But regardless of who is indicted or who resigns, it is clear that the case will have far-reaching effects on the three and three-quarters years of the Nixon Presidency that remain. White House staff members and the friends of the Administration on Capitol Hill and elsewhere expect to see marked changes in the way the White House operates, in such policy areas as the war with the news media and the law-and-order issue and in the political alignment in the Republican party.

WHITE HOUSE OPERATIONS

The salient feature of the Nixon White House has been the power of H. R. Haldeman, the President's chief of staff, which he has exercised both through his ability to decide what the president reads and whom he sees, and through a network of other aides who owe their positions to him.

Mr. Haldeman's position, in the judgment of members of the White House inner circle, has been compromised—because he failed to protect his chief from scandal, because so many of his protégés have been implicated (Jeb Stuart Magruder, Gordon C. Strachan, Dwight L. Chapin), because he himself is under suspicion in the Watergate case.

It appears unlikely that either Mr. Haldeman or his successor, should he resign or be discharged, will ever again manage to wield so much control over access to Mr. Nixon.

Seen Betrayed by System

The President has cherished the protection from personality conflicts and the hurly-burly of policy formation that the old system has given him. But he feels, according to those in a position to know, that he was betrayed by the system and those charged with operating it; everyone appears to have known about Watergate but him. He seems sufficiently shaken by the spreading scandal to modify his insulation.

Such a change, in turn, may make it possible for Cabinet members and members of Congress and others who have complained of isolation from the President to make more of an impact on his thinking, or at least to state their cases more fully.

It is unclear who would profit from a decline in the Haldeman-entourage's standing. One source suggested that John D. Ehrlichman, Mr. Nixon's chief domestic adviser, might benefit, but Mr. Ehrlichman is an old friend of Mr. Haldeman's (they roomed together in college) and there has been speculation that he could eventually be implicated in the case.

The already shell-shocked staff, at any rate, will have to be rebuilt. And, as one White House official remarked this weekend, "It won't work the same way again."

Media Policy

Attacks on the news media was likely to be muted, at least for the time being, because of the Watergate case. Newspapers, after all, were reporting months ago things that Mr. Nixon, by his own account, began to take seriously only in March.

It would appear counterproductive for the Administration to continue to attack the media at a time when it has, in effect, accepted media accounts of the Watergate case.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the Presidential press secretary, has been one vehicle for the attacks on the media. Last October, for example, he accused The Washington Post of "a blatant effort at character assassination" for linking Mr. Haldeman to the Watergate case. He, too, is a protégé of Mr. Haldeman, having been recruited from the same advertising agency.

Mr. Ziegler was attacked at a press briefing last week as a liar by one reporter, Clark Mollenhoff, and there is general agreement among correspondents assigned to the White House that the months of denials of White House involvement in the Watergate scandal had eroded his credibility.

LAW AND ORDER

The Administration's campaign for more stringent police methods and its portrayal of itself as the implacable foe of criminals, seems sure to be

slowed somewhat by the Watergate case.

Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell's admission that he heard at least two discussions of illegal bugging proposals at a time when he was the nation's chief legal officer, and apparently took no action against the plotters, does not fit well with the official law-and-order rhetoric.

One source suggested that Mr. Nixon, like Calvin Coolidge after the Teapot Dome scandal, would seek a new and prestigious Attorney General and a non-political director for the Federal Bureau of Investigation to restore confidence.

Mr. Coolidge chose Harlan F. Stone and J. Edgar Hoover for those jobs.

FOREIGN POLICY

In foreign affairs there is likely to be little change. No one has made the slightest suggestion that Henry A. Kissinger, Mr. Nixon's national security adviser, knew anything about the Watergate case.

But two Chinese diplomats sought out an American friend this week to ask earnestly what changes they should anticipate. And Mr. Kissinger himself said in New York today that "a great deal will depend on how foreign countries assess the degree of authority" retained by the President.

POLITICS

The Watergate case has already provided an opportunity for Republicans unhappy with Mr. Nixon's failure to support Congressional candidates last fall to take potshots at him, and his critics on the right and left can be expected to criticize him.

The result may be a reduction in the President's ability to influence the choice of the party's 1976 Presidential nominee.

Already, the 1976 hopefuls are wondering how to cover themselves. Vice President Agnew is under pressure to dissociate himself from the whole operation, and former Treasury Secretary John B. Connally has delayed his long-planned conversion to Republicanism.

In the end, political observers believe, one of the most profound changes wrought by the scandal may be in the tone of the Nixon Administration.

In the heady days of the campaign last year—and, to a degree, in the days before and since—there flourished in the White House a kind of medieval certainty, that the Administration always knew what was best for the country, and that therefore almost anything could be done to attain its goals.

Perhaps the most famous articulation of that viewpoint was Charles W. Colson's declaration that he would run over his grandmother if necessary to reelect Richard Nixon. It was that kind of thinking, some Presidential aides have since concluded, that made the whole Watergate affair possible.