

President to Stand Pat?

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

WASHINGTON — Operating in a brooding, tomblike White House where presidential aides fear to speak out loud in the White House mess about the spreading ramifications of Watergate, President Nixon has now reached a key decision, the effect of which is to reject most of the advice pouring in on him from his few old and trusted friends.

The decision: not to fire White House staff chief H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and not to attempt the grand overhaul of the White House staff which most leaders of his party insist on if there is to be any restoration of confidence.

MR. NIXON, according to one of the very few intimates who enjoy his trust today, has thus decided, as of now, to ride out the storm as best he can with Haldeman still at his side.

If Haldeman is indicted by the Watergate grand jury, this presidential decision will obviously not survive. Mr. Nixon has said that any aide indicted would be suspended and any aide convicted would be fired.

But quite apart from the possible indictment or conviction of tough, crewcut staff boss Haldeman, Mr. Nixon's tentative decision to keep him as top presidential aide is certain to multiply Republican Party wrath over the mushy way in which Mr. Nixon has dealt with the Watergate crisis thus far.

For it has long been a well-established political fact in Mr. Nixon's Washington that Haldeman, more than any other White

House aide, is the symbol of everything that Republican politicians loathe about the President's secretive, autocratic, suspicious and politically ignorant inner staff.

Precisely for that reason, the President has been strongly advised by old friends (whom he has been consulting nonstop since he went to Key Biscayne last week) that any post-Watergate fresh start must begin with a cleaning-out of his White House staff, with Haldeman the first to go.

One wise purveyor of just such advice has been Secretary of State William P. Rogers, the suave old pal who helped Mr. Nixon through some of his other self-styled "crises." Rogers has argued for a thorough housecleaning.

Similar advice has come to the President from trusted Manhattan lawyers to whom he occasionally turns for counsel, and from Robert Finch, an intimate political colleague who predates the Nixon-Haldeman relationship.

Why, then, has Mr. Nixon tentatively decided to hang on to Haldeman? The answer may lie in the failure to find a substitute.

THERE IS ONE other hypothesis, that Mr. Nixon is planning a secret, wholly unexpected strategy in dealing with Watergate, a strategy of counterattack in which Haldeman's continued presence by his side is necessary.

The real answer will probably stay concealed until Mr. Nixon gives his own version of Watergate to the American people, now planned for next week.