

THE PRESIDENCY/HUGH SIDNEY

The Failures of Nixon's Staff

THEY always lived in a bleak wonderland, captives of their own pinched myths, these White House men now in so much trouble.

Take three of their myths. We are proudly dull—and inaccessible—because we achieve so much, they told everybody. We work harder than anybody ever has in the White House, they said. We represent the real America out there, they declared.

What preposterous assumptions. Dullness does not produce competence. Beyond the shattering moral issues in the Watergate case is the revelation that the Haldeman-Ehrlichman-Colson-Dean staff operation was, for the most part, a tragic failure. Legislative achievements were almost zero. Congress and the federal bureaucracy were systematically alienated. Trouble was rarely detected in the early stages—My Lai, Carswell, Cambodia, Watergate. When it arrived full-grown on the President's doorstep, the energies of these men were directed not at solving the problems but at ignoring or minimizing them, which in the end only magnified the difficulties. Building understanding, nurturing belief, and preserving the integrity of the presidency was their real job, not running motorcades and guarding the office door. It is of considerable interest that the Administration's leading humorist and *bon vivant*—its most accessible major official—is Henry Kissinger, untouched by scandal and clearly the man who has achieved the most.

The others equated long hours with real work. Thinking, feeling, sensing, anticipating, creating, soothing, reading, listening are the essence of government, indeed, the special charge of the White House staff. The men now in trouble redecorated their offices, took home movies, planned political tricks, walled the nation away. One of their number, searching for a new Secretary of Commerce a few months back, looked up in surprise when he was asked if he had found a man knowledgeable in Soviet-U.S. trade, a cornerstone of Nixon's foreign vision. "We never talked about it," he said. "We needed a Southerner."

Do Haldeman & Co. represent the true Middle America, the people Haldeman says read the *Reader's Digest*? That obviously is ridiculous. In the Detroit Athletic Club, they laugh more. In the suburbs of St. Louis, they understand the Constitution of the U.S. better. In San Francisco, they listen to opposing views more often. English Writer Michael Davie says that the White House wrecking crew forms a new genre of political men, something he labels "Orange County boys," a group molded by the spirit of that Southern California area where, he suggests, fear, suspicion and ignorance come together in unfortunate combinations. That seems perhaps unfair. In Orange County, there are people who are warm and open, who challenge convention and do not see disagreement as disloyalty.

The collapse of Haldeman's paper empire has cast its own mythological aura over the scene. One wanders along the White House drive these days disbelieving what one hears and sees. Twice before in the past decade it has happened. In the hours after John Kennedy's assassination, the enormity of the event was too much to absorb. In the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, when parts of Washington were burned and looted, people stood in a stupor on the White House lawn and saw the smoke drift over them and watched as looters broke windows two blocks away in deserted streets.

Press Secretary Ron Ziegler goes through his rituals of evasion like some man we never knew. Arrogance has given way to patience. Scorn, contempt and anger have faded into professions of understanding. He presides in front of his pale blue backdrop every morning with a large, uncomprehending sadness behind his eyes.

One morning last week, reporters scurried from the White House to the Executive Office Building and stood in sad wonder as the Vice President gave a public testimonial to the President's honesty. Asked another Nixonian original in a whisper, was this the first time in history a Vice President had felt compelled to give such a performance?

Then photographers eddied around the black limousine parked on the White House drive in front of the West Wing. The cameramen focused on the license plate initialed JJW 2, squeezed off a few frames, then rushed on in search of more public fragments of the shadowy drama. The elegant car belonged to Washington Lawyer John J. Wilson. And suddenly the whole scene overwhelmed one's comprehension. The President of the U.S. and his principal advisers were conferring with a criminal attorney.

BRACK—BLACK STAR

