



The Military Parallel At the White House

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SINCE THE return to the command post of General Alexander Haig, the White House has resembled a military unit responding by the book to a disaster in the field. It calls to mind the U.S. Army's disaster on the Yalu river in 1950, the subsequent headlong retreat through half of Korea, and the way General Matthew B. Ridgway then succeeded in forming strong new lines again.

The period of headlong retreat, caused by the Watergate horror, comprised the President's forced retirement of men very powerful and very close to him. But this initial retreat by no means improved the atmosphere in the White House. It was compounded of the weeping secretaries of the dismissed, the total demoralization of junior staff, the grim seclusion of the President himself, and the murk of defeatism hanging over all.

The Yalu disaster was followed by similar disorder and defeatism. General Douglas MacArthur even warned President Truman the U.S. Army would be thrown bodily out of Korea, unless he could be given four more divisions — which he knew did not exist.

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THAT WAS the moment President Truman should have fired MacArthur. Instead, the President sent General Ridgway, who did the job General MacArthur said could not be done. Unhappily, MacArthur in the present case was President Nixon himself. Hence one cannot really know what he said or thought. But at least he sent for General Haig.

The first results have been electrifying. Pre-Haig, the President had already transferred Elliot Richardson from the Defense Department to the Justice Department, where he will be far more at home. Post-Haig, the President has con-

tinued to make radical improvements in the whole character and posture of his administration.

The biggest gain has been jettisoning the old system. Here, again, one thinks of the Korean War in 1950. General MacArthur got into hideous trouble on the Yalu River because of the old system in his own headquarters — a ghastly system of sycophancy and self-serving that led naturally to MacArthur's ghastly error in judgment. In the same fashion, the old system in the Nixon White House led naturally to the Watergate horror.

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THE EXISTENCE of that system, if you think about it, has been the most serious Watergate disclosure. Behind the scenes in every administration since Herbert Hoover's, reprehensible things have always been done. But this time, it is now clear that there were two great differences.

On the one hand, singularly reprehensible things were done at the Watergate for no rational purpose whatever. No one, and least of all President Nixon, stood to gain by listening to Democratic Chairman Lawrence O'Brien's telephone conversations. On the other hand, the White House system all but automatically had generated these pointless crimes.

It was a closed system, composed of persons heedless of the general opinion, self-righteously thinking of themselves above the law, in love with power, and always using the seclusion of the President to perpetuate and increase their power. Being a closed system, it was also dangerous in all sorts of ways not connected with the Watergate horror. Hence the destruction of the old system is what chiefly puts the country in debt to the reporters who exposed Watergate.