

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

The Quality of Government

The daily work of the government goes on, of course. But the quality of government, as the Watergate cases unfold, is a deeper question. It would be highly dangerous to assume that we are in a short interim period that will end soon when the President's role in the Watergate scandals is finally cleared up. What does the phrase "cleared up" mean? The congressional hearings promise to go on for months. In addition to Senator Ervin's select committee, three other committees are actively investigating one aspect or another of the affair. As for the criminal prosecutions, they could easily go on for years. It is no brief interlude that we have now entered. The country's political leadership is going to have to find a better way to carry on its work than its present temporary, ad hoc manner.

Gen. Alexander Haig is becoming the involuntary symbol of a kind of expedient solution that could prove very costly if left in place for the long haul. It is now a month since President Nixon appointed the general to replace H. R. Haldeman as his chief of staff. According to the announcement, Gen. Haig was to take this job for a brief but unspecified period. He is a man of great intelligence and integrity, skillfully holding together the badly shaken staff of the White House as it goes about its essential work. But he is a military officer on active duty. He is, in fact, the vice chief of staff of the Army and obviously a possible future chief of staff.

A good many generals have had desks in the White House over the years. But some of them have been retired, and others were in jobs specifically related to military operations. Gen. Haig's present position slings him directly into responsibility for a wide range of political issues. There is no conceivable way that he can avoid political decisions. It is not a matter of discretion. It is the nature of the job. As time goes on, the general will become increasingly identified with a political orientation. His anomalous position will become an increasing affront to that deep and vital principle of politics. Gen. Haig is doing his best to serve his commander. It is up to his commander to end this unsatisfactory arrangement.

Sooner or later President Nixon has got to organize not only his White House staff but his whole administration on a more durable footing. Gen. Haig's present assignment reflects a kind of makeshift approach that

can be seen elsewhere in the administration. Too many important jobs remain unfilled, and too many important issues remain untended.

Watergate is not, after all, the only public issue that bothers Americans these days. Consider for example, the gasoline shortage, which has nothing to do with bugging or burglary. The White House knew, more than a year ago, that it was coming into a tight place. The figures on stocks showed it clearly. But that was a time in which the White House was giving no attention to anything but the election campaign. After the election, Mr. Nixon's first concern was to undertake a broad purge of his administration. Many of the people working on energy policy were fired or shifted. The President's energy message appeared several months later than originally expected and, when it arrived, it brought little hope of improvement in the shortages over the next year or more.

Consider food prices, in which there has been a similar pattern of inattention. The increases in prices were cause for real concern from the beginning of 1972. But the Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Butz, was under instructions to get farm prices up before the election. He was also told to see what he could do about selling some of those expensive wheat surpluses to the Russians. Mr. Butz's defect as Secretary is that he carries out his orders all too well. After the election, unfortunately, prices kept right on rising. Absent the Watergate, perhaps the President would have turned to some new approach to agriculture. What it might have been, one cannot know.

Perhaps it is true that, for deep and unavoidable economic reasons, we have come to the end of the era of abundant oil and cheap food. Perhaps there is nothing that the national government can really do about these prices and shortages. But if that is the case, then the President needs to address himself directly to this unpleasant change. It already touches the lives of us all. Angry and uneasy consumers are given the impression that these issues are being left to second level officials who have little authority to do more than mechanically follow obsolescent directives.

Politics is the business of responding to this kind of public anxiety. The ability to respond is the ability to govern, and that is the element now falling into doubt.