

The 'Attack Group': To Be or Not To Be?

While President Nixon deals at the summit with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, the subterranean conflict inside the White House over how he should deal with Watergate has broken out again, with Mr. Nixon's press conference policy a central issue.

Since early this week, at the President's direction, Charles W. Colson, the ex-White House special counsel and political aide, has been tapping political sentiment outside the White House to test his own feeling that the President has far more to gain than lose by holding a full-blown session with reporters, his first since mid-March.

At the same time, a group of middle-level White House aides, deeply worried that advice Mr. Nixon is now getting from his new top-level staff is too "soft" and defensive, has quietly reconstituted the election-year "attack group" of 1972 to plot hard-line Watergate strategy.

That strategy, the "attack group" believes, should not only rule out presidential press conferences for the foreseeable future. It also argues that Mr.

Nixon has conceded far too much already in his public statements and should admit nothing more, no matter what his ousted White House counsel, John W. Dean III, or any future witness tells the Senate Watergate Committee headed by Sen. Sam Ervin of North Carolina, next week.

Ironically, the "attack group," formed in the summer of 1972 to keep the Democrats on the defensive and to pass political ammunition to Nixon surrogates campaigning across the country, was largely a creature of Colson himself. Colson was its guiding light and its most resourceful member.

However, it is Colson, whose departure from the White House was not connected with the Watergate scandal, who is undermining the newly-constituted "attack group," and pushing hard for a new and more dynamic press relations policy for Mr. Nixon.

Now a Washington lawyer who so far has been tied only indirectly to various parts of the spreading Watergate scandal, Colson has maintained an extremely intimate relationship with the President. It is Colson's conviction that following Dean's testi-

mony, certain to be the most explosive and probably the most damaging to Mr. Nixon, the President must hold his press conference.

Colson's support for that policy is strongly backed by virtually every elected party office-holder, and many non-elected party operatives, he has discussed it with. Their consensus: despite the danger of a presidential misstep in answering the slew of Watergate questions certain to be thrown at him, Mr. Nixon must be willing to go public with his defense on Watergate.

Moreover, although not all public opinion polls agree, some samples indicate the existence of a comparatively high sympathy quotient for Mr. Nixon, despite a widespread feeling that he knew far more about the Watergate coverup than he has so far admitted.

If the press conference turned into a ferocious attack by the press on the President, moreover, that sympathy might be considerably enlarged.

But the "attack group," one member of which is Lawrence M. Higby, former top aide to ex-White House staff chief H.R. (Bob) Haldeman, feels a presidential press conference would be a dangerous concession to the softliners.

The attack group has been meeting regularly to plot policy and to counsel Nixon aides on Watergate strategy.

Thus before Anne Armstrong, a White House counsellor, went on the CBS morning news last week, it was the attack group that instructed her how to attack the Ervin committee, a recurring theme of White House hardliners.

Elsewhere in the White House, staff chief Alexander Haig Jr. was promoting a presidential press conference until the President's Watergate statement of May 22. The furious press interrogation of White House counsel Leonard Garment and special counsel Fred Buzhardt that evening at least temporarily changed his mind.

To resolve the conflict over presidential press conference strategy, and other conflicts deep inside the White House, Mr. Nixon may now turn to the powerful Melvin R. Laird, who only took over in the White House on Monday. If he does, the President is likely to find himself holding a full-scale press conference soon — and the newly reconstituted attack group is likely to find itself permanently out of commission.