

The Departure of Herbert Klein

The coincidence, of John Dean's devastating Senate testimony and Herbert G. Klein's final week in the Nixon administration points up why Richard Nixon's presidency is on the brink of ruin.

The widely known but largely untold story is that Klein, as the administration's director of communications, has been ignored and humiliated by the White House. At one scarcely believable point last summer, the Nixon palace guard was ready to deepen the humiliation by preventing him from even attending the Republican National Convention. Like other Nixon lieutenants similarly demeaned, Klein was guilty of having contacts beyond the White House walls and advice the President found unpalatable.

The conclusions are inescapable. Had Herb Klein been able to maintain his old, pre-White House intimacy with Mr. Nixon, he might well have discovered the Watergate affair. Had he discovered it, he surely would have protested and warned the President. Instead, the new generation of Nixon advisers ushered in disaster.

Klein is not alone among White House aides who might have prevented Watergate but instead were eased out

of authority: Pete Peterson, Robert Ellsworth, John Sears, Robert Finch, Stephen Hess, Bryce Harlow, Pat Moynihan, Donald Rumsfeld. The common denominators of this varied lot are broad experience and widespread contacts.

Mr. Nixon once relied on such broad-gauged assistants, including San Diego newspaper editor Klein, one of his closest advisers in the late 1950s and during his 1960 presidential campaign. But as Mr. Nixon's attitude toward the press hardened, so did his attitude toward Klein. Even in 1960, he complained privately about Klein's "crybaby" recommendations for easier press access, grumbling that Herb wanted to make it easier on himself rather than help the candidate.

Mr. Nixon knew what he wanted for his second presidential try in 1968: a hard-nosed press secretary without friends in the press or unpleasant recommendations. H.R. Haldeman came up with a young advertising executive named Ron Ziegler. Klein was kept at arm's length, increasingly criticized by the imperious Haldeman.

Klein's hopes of becoming presidential press secretary were disappointed in 1969 when the entirely programmable Ziegler was appointed and Klein

got the new post of director of communications for the executive branch. Despite Klein's former intimacy with the President and his invaluable political experience, he saw almost nothing of Mr. Nixon and had little influence over policy.

Still, Klein maintained his loyalty, using his substantial and well-merited prestige in press and television circles outside Washington to effectively plead the President's cause and trying without much success, to promote more presidential press conferences.

The reward was more humiliation. Kenneth Clawson, a former Washington Post reporter, last year was given control of Klein's department (while Klein kept the title). Presidential aides leaked word that Klein would be quitting by election day but never so informed Klein. The final provocation to make life unbearable for Klein was to keep him home in Washington while every Nixon ribbon clerk went to the Republican Convention in Miami Beach.

A few cooler heads prevailed: how would Klein's fellow editors covering the convention regard his surprising absence? So, Klein was taken to Miami Beach and given command of a small

yacht where he dispensed food and drinks to reporters. But he was given no hard political information about anything.

After the election, Klein kept fighting privately for presidential accessibility to the press and publicly defending the administration. Even now, Klein remains steadfastly loyal to his President and administration.

His true thoughts were unveiled briefly last Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" when he asserted: "Too much responsibility was given to too many people with a lack of experience." Friends say he particularly meant Charles W. Colson (one presidential aide told us Klein, uncharacteristically harsh, described Colson to him as a "cobra"). But he also puts Haldeman and John Ehrlichman in the same category.

On the eve of Klein's departure, there is a tragic contrast. Mr. Nixon, unwilling to hear Klein's "crybaby" advice on press relations, nevertheless received from him superb missionary work among the media. The hard-boiled Haldeman-Ehrlichman-Colson triumvirate, reinforcing Mr. Nixon's anti-press prejudices, gave him something else: Watergate.

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