

'Excessive Power' of the

By Carroll Kilpatrick

Washington

THE Watergate experience has disclosed not only an appalling lack of character and integrity in one administration, but a fundamental weakness in the institution of the presidency.

In recent years, the United States has become the only Western power where the authority of the chief executive has expanded to the extent that it could undermine basic democratic rights, and the President is probably the one individual with the awesome power to plunge the world into nuclear war.

The excessive concentration of power in the American executive did

not begin, of course, with the Nixon administration. It has developed over many decades, with its modern manifestation probably traceable to New Deal days. Liberal Democrats were convinced then that because the struggle was between a liberal President and a conservative Congress, everything possible should be done to strengthen the former and weaken the latter.

The same spirit prevailed in the Kennedy administration. The bright young men surrounding the President were certain that their first duty was to enhance his power. Prof. Richard Neustadt of Harvard produced the perfect rationale in his book "Presidential Power," arguing that the President's men must always think first of the President's prestige and well-being.

They Know Better?

Appointed aides easily convinced themselves that they knew better than Congress, or the cabinet, or outside critics what was best for the country. The arrogance that has characterized those now disgraced in the Nixon administration was evident then, if to a somewhat lesser degree.

Like all those who serve a prince, they have no clothing but that which he provides, and they identify their security with the national security.

A second problem is that many presidential aides have little or no political experience. They are not confirmed by the Senate and have never stood for office.

It is worth recalling that when Sam Rayburn was told how brilliant the Kennedy appointees were, he replied that he would feel more confident if one of them had ever been elected sheriff.

None of them had, just as none of the Nixon men had, and both groups developed a contempt for the people that is not harbored by most successful elected officials.

Laird in Action

When President Nixon in his desperation recently turned to an experienced politician like Melvin Laird for help, Laird did two things which would have been alien to the Ehrlichmans and Haldemans. He visited his old Democratic (and Republican) friends on Capitol Hill, and he called on cabinet members and the District of Columbia mayor in their offices.

He did not summon them to confer with him at the White House. These were symbolic acts by Laird but they were enormously important in saying to responsible officials that they were not just pawns of the White House.

In his first interview after joining the President's staff, Laird told David Broder of the Washington Post that one of the "pluses" from Watergate may be that "the operations of the executive branch will be strengthened." He meant just that — the "executive branch," not just the White House.

"We just have to open this place (the White House) up," Laird said, "but it's not easy to do. There's been a tendency on the part of people to concentrate everything in the White House and the White House staff."

Newspapermen covering the White House first began to write critically of the overconcentration of power in the Nixon White House at least three years ago. Cabinet officers and Republican Congressmen made many of the same criticisms in more

Presidency

restrained fashion. All were ridiculed by the Nixon men.

Now it is clear that the Nixon men might have been spared their present ordeal if they had only accepted the criticisms in good faith and recognized that no President can successfully govern if he isolates himself from his party, from his cabinet and from the raucous press.

These three groups represent safety valves which have to be endured for the President's sake as well as for the country's. They are parts of the system built up to protect the President and the people.

Cabinet Functions

The cabinet in this country has never had the standing or influence that the cabinet has had in Britain or other parliamentary systems. Yet throughout our history it has served a basic purpose even when neglected by strong presidents. It was a vital in-

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strument in FDR's days despite the great power he took into his hands. It was an active consultative body in the Eisenhower administration.

While cabinet meetings as such have seldom been the policy-making forum, cabinet officers until recent years exercised broad executive authority in their departments while taking policy guidance from the President. But President Kennedy believed not only that the cabinet meeting was largely a waste of time, but that his bright young staff men could effectively supervise the de-

A
Personal
View

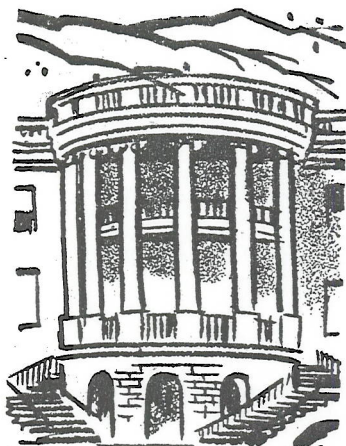
Checks and Balances

The founding fathers produced a system of checks and balances with a division of power among three branches of government. It has been a workable system, never perfect, and it has preserved basic freedoms. But in recent years, as Mr. Nixon has observed, the White House has grown like Topsy.

It has tried to administer the vast bureaucracy instead of attempting to give it guidance and leadership. The President has tried to perform the impossible and run the government with a small group of acolytes who know no loyalty but to him. It is an impossible task.

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departments and oversee cabinet officers.

President Roosevelt normally held two cabinet meetings a week, and President Eisenhower held one a week, but President Kennedy held only 15 cabinet meetings in his first 14 months in office. He did not regard the cabinet as a consultative body at all.

Critics of the Kennedy administration made their most telling point when they argued that he might have avoided the debacle of the Bay of Pigs invasion if it had been thoroughly discussed in the cabinet, where objective criticism by men with varying political experiences might have been heard. The one person outside his administration he did consult — Sen. Fulbright — advised him against it. The whole plan was the work of non-elected experts.

But in recent years, as the departments' authority has been whittled away, cabinet officers consult a White House aide almost automatically on many matters they should take responsibility for themselves. None of the last three presidents has fully trusted the departments and agencies charged under the law for public administration.

Conspiratorial Theory

The Nixon administration may be the first, however, that has believed in the conspiratorial theory of history. Having come to power against the massed opposition of many of the nation's traditional power centers, it discovered enemies in every nook and cranny.

It distrusted not only the press and the Eastern intellectual community. Many of those closest to the President also distrusted the bureaucracy, a large part of

the Republican party and eventually even the President's own cabinet.

Within weeks after they took office, some cabinet officers began to realize that they had little access to the President and less influence than appointed aides. The "Berlin Wall" around the President was a reality, built at his direction by men largely inexperienced in, and distrustful of, government.

Only the most loyal supporters were admitted to the oval office, and once a critical view was expressed, a man's usefulness, as Secretary Hickel quickly learned, was at an end.

Solitude and Secrecy

The President's own need for solitude and his penchant for secrecy contributed to the isolation which, if his version of Watergate is accurate, sealed him off from information that was essential for him to protect himself from the cabal operating around him.

Now Mr. Nixon has suggested — as President Johnson did after he had suffered unmercifully at the hands of the people — that it is time to consider a one-term presidency of six years. It is a move which instead of putting the nation's chief political leader in the middle of the fray, where he belongs, would remove him another step from the conflicting passions of public opinion.

The need is to keep the President closer to the people, not to set him higher on a pedestal.