

'It Just Ain't So'

By Douglas Hallett

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — I am tired of being smeared. Each day I open the newspaper, look at a magazine, or watch television I read and hear of the White House in which I worked, and hardly recognize the place. Senator Weicker has opined that it was a place where "everything that was touched was corroded." Joseph Alsop has written that it was inhabited by "bottom-dwelling slugs." Hugh Sidey has declared that the Nixon Administration turned the White House into "a private instrument of revenge and fear" where "hatred replaced hope."

These things are simply not true.

The Watergate scandal has highlighted much that was wrong with the White House during President Nixon's first term. There was an anti-intellectual strain which too often found public-relations slogans more comfortable than serious debate. There was a suspicion of outsiders, be they press, Congress, or just plain people, which too often dissolved into paranoid attacks on the First Amendment, the balance of powers within government and the public's right to criticize. There was an all-pervasive concern with security which was too often used to justify excesses of secrecy.

But these failings are not all that the Watergate White House produced, and, even together, they justify none of the blanket attacks launched daily on us by many of our journalistic sages and political leaders.

Henry Kissinger may have been bugging his staff, but he was also serving as the President's day-to-day operational chief in ending the Vietnam war, breaking twenty years of barriers between the United States and China, negotiating a strategic arms limitations agreement with the Soviet Union, opening new trade relationships with Eastern Europe, soothing tensions in the Middle East, and, most importantly, in recognizing the need for a less aggressive American presence throughout the globe.

Likewise, John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman may have been engaged in illegalities and improprieties as yet unclear, but they were also directing a White House staff which brought

about the first Federal budget in a generation in which domestic dollars outnumbered defense expenditures, a staff which ended the draft, produced the country's first experiment in revenue sharing, set up the Government's first effective environmental protection program, helped bring about the first slowdown in crime in over a decade, and made attempts, if somewhat confused ones, at welfare reform, national health care and pension protection.

What was wrong with the White House staff during the last four years was not, for the most part, in its motivations and goals; the failures had much more to do with its experience and sense of self-assuredness at the reins of power.

President Nixon came to office as an expert in the two extremes of public statesmanship, foreign affairs and national politics. In the one, he has demythologized America's perception of other nations, taking the country from an era in which a liberal such as Hubert Humphrey could paint pictures of an embattled democracy facing an "international conspiracy headquartered in Peking, China" to a realistic appraisal of a world order in which there is rarely the totally wrong or the totally right. In the other, he has cracked the New Deal coalition of Roosevelt and Truman, recognizing the legitimate concern of the blue-collar workers for safety in their homes, independence in their choice of companions, preservation of their buying power and protection of their neighborhood institutions and standards.

His domestic programs have not fared so well. The President, preoccupied with other things, turned his domestic government over to familiar campaign hands when his first surrogate, Daniel Moynihan, proved an indifferent administrator. Cautious, overly political and distrustful of ideas, these men were unable and unwilling to apply the same experimental fervor to internal affairs that the President, with Kissinger, was exercising abroad.

Instead, they compromised too often. There was a readiness to bail out big business rather than propose tax and regulatory policies which preserved the marketplace; a family assistance program rather than a negative income

tax; rhetoric about aid to parochial schools rather than movements toward a voucher system; concern about governmental control over peoples' lives rather than concern about corporate and bureaucratic control.

But how serious a failure has it been? President Nixon's domestic programs will never put him in a rank with Roosevelt, nor even Truman, but they have certainly exceeded, qualitatively at least, the works of Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson. If he has not done all that we might wish, unlike Eisenhower and Kennedy, he has done something and, unlike Johnson, what he has done seems to work for the most part.

Coupled with his foreign successes, the President's policies—despite Watergate—place him in the top rank of American Chief Executives of this century. We who worked under him share in that achievement, and have a right to take pride in it. Most of us are neither bereft of goodness nor mean of spirit. At the least, we do not deserve Mr. Sidey's judgment that "no one cared," for it just ain't so. We may have lacked the knowledge and background to do all that was possible, but we really did try to do all that we could.

Douglas Hallett, a former White House aide, is a student at Harvard Law School.