

Mr. Nixon: Ignoring the Political Experts

When President Nixon was about to trigger his shuddering crisis two weeks ago, he consulted the two senior aides with the poorest credentials for forecasting the mood of Congress or the public: Chief of Staff Alexander Haig and Press Secretary Ron Ziegler.

Haig, Ziegler and the President's three lawyers handling Watergate legal affairs were the only advisers sought out by Mr. Nixon. Sage political practitioners on the White House staff, some brought in at the President's pleading after the Watergate crisis broke last spring, were ignored.

Thus, in today's bad times as in yesterday's good times, Mr. Nixon's aversion to seeking counsel from Republican politicians remains undimmed. He prefers non-political technicians whose loyalty he trusts and whose disagreement he considers unlikely. This tendency, persisting as he still confronts Congress over the Watergate prosecution, helps build Republican pessimism that Mr. Nixon will not rehabilitate himself politically.

The adviser held by Republicans to be most responsible for Mr. Nixon's disastrous course is Prof. Charles Alan Wright, the constitutional lawyer from the University of Texas who for months has led the President's Watergate defense. Besides Wright, assistant White House counsel Fred Buzhardt and, to a lesser extent, counsel Leonard Garment consulted with the President in devising a strategy on the surreptitious tape recordings which was bound to force out Archibald Cox as special prosecutor.

The only non-lawyers at the White House consulted by Mr. Nixon were the two men who have jointly replaced the departed H. R. Haldeman as Mr. Nixon's most trusted aide: career Army officer Haig and advertising junior executive Ziegler.

Political experience is scarce among these five. Haig and Wright, each with a brilliant record in his own field, are total neophytes politically. Garment and Ziegler have been involved in politics only as Nixon campaign aides.



Alexander Haig



Charles Alan Wright

Buzhardt, a West Point graduate-turned-lawyer, has a background in conservative politics in South Carolina, but other White House staffers consider him a blunderer in national politics whose miscalculations have deepened the President's Watergate problems.

Some "war-gaming" — that is, forecasting likely implications—of Cox's dismissal was done by the President with Haig and Ziegler. But there was no systematic calculation of what would follow. Failing to perceive the probable impact in the Justice Department, Congress and the nation, Mr. Nixon had to retreat in disorder by surrendering the tapes.

What makes this bumbling so unnecessary is the abundance of political wisdom at the doorstep of the Oval Office. Presidential counselors Melvin R. Laird and Bryce Harlow, importuned to return to government by Mr. Nixon last spring so he could avoid future blunders, were not consulted. Nor was William Timmons, his unsung but sen-

sible and experienced chief congressional lobbyist.

Laird had long held privately that it would be politically lethal for the President to resolve the tapes issue by firing Cox. But Laird, Harlow and Timmons were not informed of what was happening by Haig until Friday, Oct. 19—the day before the Saturday massacre. By then, it was too late to war-game the consequences of the President's fateful course.

If the President scorns such resident politicians, he naturally has not consulted Republicans outside the White House. For example, Rep. John Rhodes of Arizona, set to replace Gerald Ford as House Republican leader, never sees the President alone. Accordingly, he was not asked his views in advance two weeks ago.

The iron ring around the President has not been breached since Haldeman's fall. William Ruckelshaus, a proven Nixon loyalist until forced out



Ron Ziegler

by Cox's dismissal, never consulted with the President from the time he became acting FBI director April 30 until he was fired as deputy attorney general Oct. 20.

Nor have the latest convulsions changed anything. In the crisis atmosphere of last week, political wise man Laird was off on a previously scheduled speaking tour—far from the President's side. Congressional party leaders remained locked out. It follows that Mr. Nixon underestimated the congressional and public demand for a truly independent special prosecutor.

Whereas Republican politicians last spring were demanding that the doors of the White House be opened and the President exposed to expert political advice, their hope has shriveled. Facing the worst trouble of any President in a century, Mr. Nixon insists on his isolation from professional—and perhaps uncongenial—political advice. If he survives, he will do it without such valuable help.