

The White House Inner Circle Grows Smaller

The sharp decline in morale and confidence during the past week at the White House can be traced to the remarkable press briefing conducted by assistant press secretary Gerald Warren on Monday and what lay behind it.

Knowing that White House reporters would swoop down with hard-eyed questions about the obliterated 18-minute presidential conversation on Watergate, Warren spent that morning in extreme agitation. What in the world, Warren asked his fellow aides, could he possibly tell the press?

But by the time the newsmen gathered to ask questions, all indecision by Warren had disappeared. Asked to comment on the missing 18 minutes, Warren brushed it off with the comment that "it would be unwise for me to discuss it from here because it will be thoroughly developed in open court." He later launched an inexplicable attack on Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski for allegedly leaking information to the press.

Political insiders at the White House regarded these answers as agonizingly ill-advised. They also knew immediately that though these strange comments came from the mouth of Gerry Warren, they were the words of Press Secretary Ron Ziegler.

"Gerry doesn't say boo without get-

ting the sign from Ron," one senior aide told us. What makes this so ominous is the obvious source of Ziegler's inspiration: only Ziegler and chief-of-staff Alexander Haig have continuous and intimate access to President Nixon.

There is, then, a double-barreled charge of gloom at the White House this week. The chilling news of the obliterated 18 minutes has badly undercut Mr. Nixon's "operation candor," the newest attempt to restore his credibility and revive the spirits of his supporters. According to one top Nixon lieutenant famed for remorseless optimism, the incident negated at least two-thirds of "operation candor."

Equally ominous, the Warren performance helped confirm that Mr. Nixon still runs the domestic and political operations of the U.S. government through two men. "You couldn't do that effectively, even if they were Jesus Christ and Moses," an angry aide told us. Ziegler and Haig are considerably less.

Despite all the post-Watergate propaganda about a new and open White House, many aides believe access to the President is even more constricted by Mr. Nixon's own choice—than with the universally damned days of H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman. Some aides who were able to see Mr.

Nixon by asking Haldeman now complain they only see the President when he calls them in.

The fact that an isolated Mr. Nixon relies on Ziegler as one of his two confidants is particularly unnerving to lieutenants, who have minimum high regard for Ziegler's political acumen. Ziegler is not one to rescue the President from his own prejudices, so his instructions to Warren for the daily briefing undoubtedly reflect Mr. Nixon's own views far too accurately.

A case in point is the intemperate White House reaction to the controversial reporting of the presidential "slapping" incident at Disney World. Cooler heads on the White House staff would have insisted that Mr. Nixon let the bizarre matter die a quiet, un-mourned death. But Ziegler passed the full measure of the President's fury to the outer world—to no advantage.

On Monday morning, those same cooler heads would have urged the President to instruct Warren to express presidential regret over the missing 18 minutes and the actions of his secretary, Rose Mary Woods, since he certainly will have to take a stand sooner or later. They also would have advised against an attack on Jaworski, unfair in essence anyway, that predictably angered the special prosecutor but gained nothing for the White

House. Unlike Ziegler, these cooler heads had no presidential access.

Haig is vastly more admired than Ziegler by his White House colleagues for intelligence, experience and integrity. But he also is seen as politically untutored—and hence politically inept. "The trouble is," one Nixon lieutenant said, "Al doesn't know it."

Certainly, Haig must shoulder much of the blame for the debasing White House attacks on former Atty. Gen. Elliot Richardson and his role in the firing of Archibald Cox. Other aides believe Haig, overburdened by Mr. Nixon's reliance on him, has unwisely allocated far too much time defending himself in the Cox-Richardson drama when he would have done better to forget the entire business.

Striving to maintain their loyalty to Mr. Nixon, his aides tend to blame Ziegler and, to a much lesser extent, Haig for political incompetence as the source of the President's endless crises. However, the harsher truth is less devious. The overburdening of a few trusted aides, self-isolation and consistently poor political judgment are the ineradicable trademarks of Richard M. Nixon. Instead of moderating these characteristics, Watergate seems to have deepened them.