

Operation 'Do Not Disturb'

Every time the Nixon administration seems to be veering dangerously close to contact with political reality, you can count on one of the President's nannies to tug him safely back to dreamland.

This mission was entrusted to H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman in the first term. For four turbulent years, they kept the "Do Not Disturb" sign firmly in place on the Oval Office door.

Occasionally, an obstreperous character like John Connally would barge his way past them and disrupt the President's reveries by rudely shouting: "Hey, dreamboat, the economy's going down the drain, and they ain't gonna reelect you on your looks." But then Haldeman and Ehrlichman would move in, and the ill-mannered fellow would find himself back in Houston, practicing law.

Regrettably, the Watergate affair—one of those minor disturbances that the guardians assured Mr. Nixon was beneath his notice—carried these good servants off, and made it necessary to find someone new to chase trouble from the White House doorstep.

It wasn't easy, but this is a persevering President, and in time he found two new security blankets named Ron Ziegler and Al Haig. The former had been around from the start, but no one realized until the older Germans left how much young Ron had learned about encasing the President in a warm and cozy cocoon.

General Haig had more trouble mastering his role, because he has been trained in an Army staff system where the premium was placed on getting accurate information from the battlefield to higher headquarters. In Haig's old world, a junior officer could ruin his career by misjudging a thrust by a crack enemy armored division as a feint by an infantry platoon.

But once Haig understood that the commander-in-chief wanted reassurance more than he wanted accurate reconnaissance, he adapted his talents to the situation. Did a number of presidential advisers say Ziegler was more of a liability than an asset to the administration? Petty jealousy, sir. Did a certain Cabinet officer see fatal flaws in a surefire scheme to scotch the special prosecutor? The man has been drinking, sir; pay no attention to him.

During the transition period from Haldeman and Ehrlichman to Ziegler and Haig, the guard on the President's door slipped; reality intruded. Connally got in, once or twice; Mel Laird, more often; Bryce Harlow, even more frequently, because he is so small he gets under the radar screen Haldeman and Ehrlichman had left behind.

After the "tipsy" Cabinet member somehow proved right about the Cox firing, reality came flooding into the Oval Office in waves of scared, frustrated Republican congressmen.

In two weeks of meetings, the President heard more about the crumbling of communications and political alliances on Capitol Hill than he had allowed himself to hear in the previous five years.

He vowed to his visitors that he would furnish answers to all the hard questions they were asking. And he promised that never again would he become a stranger to their concerns.

But then the guardians stepped in and whisked him off to San Clemente, away from any disturbing influences. They told him: It's all right now, Mr. President, those nasty men won't bother you any more. You can go back to drawing peace plans on your yellow pads, and we'll keep an eye out that no one disturbs you.

Then they told the public that ill-named Operation Candor was scrapped. It had accomplished all it could, they said. A special White House survey of 20 congressional districts showed impeachment fever abating.

They told the President: You've turned it around, sir. The polls show you've already surged from 27 per cent support all the way up to 29 per cent, and your momentum will carry you the rest of the way. You know how important momentum is, Mr. President; just like in football. Yes sir, we're sure you've got momentum now.

It would be laughable if it weren't so pitiable. We are back to square one: This is fantasyland and here are your friendly guides, Ron and Al. Forget your troubles; forget the real world's woes; and come journey with us down the river of dreams.

Those who know better—Jerry Ford, Mel Laird, John Rhodes, Barry Goldwater, Bill Timmons, Bryce Harlow, and the rest—can only shake their heads and say they're sure the President will follow through on the pledges of disclosure he gave Republican congressmen, governors, party leaders—and the American people.

But they sense they've lost him again, that the guardians are back at the gate. He will play in fantasyland until a new jolt of reality shakes the White House again.

And it will. It's just a matter of when.