



On Chief-Executiveship

By Joseph A. Califano Jr.

WASHINGTON—To appreciate the depth of President Nixon's personal predicament, it is essential to understand the Presidential staff system and the vantage point of Presidents.

Since the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the concept of the White House staff has been that a President is entitled to have a group of people whose loyalty runs only to him, whose power derives solely from him (not the Congress or constituent pressure groups that often vie for the attention of Cabinet and agency heads), and who can be trusted to share the President's perception of his interests and carry out his orders to protect them.

Whether the White House staff is small as in the days of Mr. Roosevelt or numbers well over a hundred as in the days of Mr. Nixon, there will be a few staff members in daily contact with the President and totally dedicated to him. Their power comes from the ability to say with authority, "The President wants. . . ."

These intimate few do not maintain the ability to use those three words with authority unless they are doing what the President wants and tells them to do. Without that authority, the personal and press secretaries, the top national-security and domestic-affairs advisers and the chief of staff are useless to the President. With more than 2,000 Presidential appointees scattered in more than 100 departments and agencies, the President could not run the Government without a few such aides.

The White House press corps is the daily national amplifier of Presidential statements and positions. Its chief source is the White House press secretary, and it is inconceivable that any President will permit his press secretary to make statements—all of which are on his behalf—without personally

clearing them and, indeed, in critical situations, approving the precise words used.

Cabinet officers and agency heads quickly get a sense of those members of the White House staff who reflect the President's orders and desires and those who do not. While Cabinet officers will take routine actions on the request of White House aides, it is rare to find one who will take any major action without being certain that it is the President who issued the order.

As the Congress and the American people focus on the issue of Presidential responsibility, they must recognize that the White House is run by one man and that all staff members derive their authority from that man. They must recognize that like successful lawyers and businessmen, successful American politicians—and Presidents are by electoral definition the most successful—make their own decisions and pay close attention to detail.

By this I mean more than "the buck stops here," or that full responsibility for the Bay of Pigs rests at the top, or that Vietnam was Mr. Johnson's war, not Robert S. McNamara's. Whether a President has the publicly seductive style of John F. Kennedy, the overbearing intensity of Mr. Johnson, or the introverted personality of Mr. Nixon, he will personally direct every move on major issues, particularly when those moves can decisively affect the marrow of his political career and historical judgments on the long-term value of that career.

This attention to detail is particularly critical when what is at stake is the very essence of a man's Presidency. In this sense, Watergate is to Mr. Nixon what the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis were to Mr. Kennedy and the Vietnam war and Great Society were to Mr. Johnson.

What Watergate and its surrounding events involve is Mr. Nixon's place in history, his personal reputation, whether he will be convicted of a crime, impeached, or exonerated, remembered as the man who opened the door to China or who headed the most corrupt Administration in our history.

Even White House aides as trusted as H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman would not be permitted by the President to deal on their own in areas as central to Mr. Nixon's personal and political life and reputation as those involved in the present scandals.

If the press is to be criticized in connection with its reporting of these scandals, it is not, as Mr. Nixon and

Spiro T. Agnew have suggested, because it has been careless in printing unverified charges.

It is, rather, because of its acceptance, with so little skepticism, of the myth that Mr. Nixon is somehow the uninformed victim of aides and Cabinet officers whose political enthusiasm spilled over into criminality. This myth defies the reality of Presidential power and the personal, political and historical ambition that accompanies it.

We do not have to plow through the pages of "Six Crises" to know that Mr. Nixon is most attendant to details that intimately affect his political career. One need not work at the White House to reach that conclusion about any President who served there. One need only understand human nature, politicians with an eye on the history books, and fathers concerned about what their children think of them.

Informed with this Presidential perspective, perhaps it will be easier for all of us to appreciate why any President in Mr. Nixon's position must reject resignation and fight impeachment as long as he has the physical and mental strength to do so.

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