

To Stay Too Long'

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 14—George P. Shultz of Illinois, the last of the original members of President Nixon's first Cabinet, is leaving his post as Secretary of the Treasury with both pride and regret.

He is the quiet man of the Nixon team, patient, considerate, conservative and calm, and he is leaving, he says, not because of Watergate but because he is tired and recognizes that in these days of savage controversies and intractable problems, Cabinet members have a "tendency to stay too long."

So he sits by a blazing log fire in his office, smoking a pipe, and says he is proud of the progress made in race relations and even in monetary relations in the last five years, and regrets the decline in civility and in public confidence in the Government.

He will not discuss the scandals now threatening the Government, other than to say he "hopes" the President can endure them, so he turns the conversation away from Watergate to other subjects he plans to think and write about after his retirement in May.

Two things seem to trouble him: First, the preoccupation of members of Congress with personal interest, with re-election, rather than with the public interest. On Capitol Hill, too, he seems to suggest, there is a tendency to stay too long."

Second, he finds it ironical and a little sad that this Administration came to power determined to get the Government off the people's back, and yet for a variety of reasons ended up by interfering in the private affairs of the people and of business—with conservation, wage and price regulations—more than most Administrations in recent history.

With the departure of this thoughtful and decent man—who was so conscious of the proprieties of public service and the dangers of conflict of interest that he wouldn't even discuss future jobs until he had actually resigned—it is hard to avoid wondering how different the history of this Administration might have been if the President had really kept his promise to use his Cabinet as a committee of advisers and listen to their private doubts and counsel.

Mr. Nixon made a great deal of the importance of his Cabinet when he picked his original team. On Dec. 11, 1968, after his first election but before taking office, he took the unusual step of introducing his Cabinet members and their wives on national television.

"Every one of these men I've introduced to you," he said, "is an independent thinker, I can assure you. I haven't found any one of them who agrees with me completely on everything that I believe about what ought

to be done in this country.

"But that's all to the good. I don't want a Cabinet of 'yes men.' Every man in this Cabinet will be urged to speak out in the Cabinet and within the Administration on all the great issues so that the decisions we make will be the best decisions we could possibly reach."

It is almost too painful now to repeat Mr. Nixon's glowing tribute to John Mitchell "as a man of superb judgment, a man who knows how to pick people and to lead them and to inspire them with quiet confidence and poise and dignity," but the thrust of his remarks in those happier days was unmistakable.

The Cabinet was not to be dispersed into the great separate departmental palaces but was to be brought into all the great decisions before the President so that the collective judgments and varied opinions of experienced men could be brought constantly to bear on the President's actions.

From the very beginning, however, while the President did often rely on the advice of Cabinet members in the areas of their special responsibility, their general knowledge and judgment of affairs were seldom sought. "It is a Cabinet not just of specialists but of generalists," he emphasized, but most questions of general interest, and particularly questions that touched on the integrity of the Administration, were handled in the White House and not in the Cabinet.

Even at this very late date, when the President is facing the possibility of being impeached, there is no evidence that the President ever once gathered his Cabinet together and asked them to discuss candidly what they thought should be done about his predicament.

The result has been that an extraordinary number of Cabinet members, feeling part of an Administration but not privy to its secrets, have slipped away, usually without saying why even to the President, let alone the public.

In these five years, Mr. Nixon has had four Attorneys General, three Treasury Secretaries, three Defense Secretaries, three Commerce Secretaries, three Secretaries of H.E.W., two Secretaries of State, two Interior Secretaries, two Agriculture Secretaries, three Labor Secretaries, two Secretaries of Housing and two of Transportation.

This makes Mr. Nixon the most prolific Cabinet-maker since Chippendale, but he hasn't really had a Cabinet, merely a cabal of cronies in the White House, and most of the leaders of that cabal are now under indictment. It is all very odd: With good and decent men like Shultz around and with a Cabinet that had to face hard questions before their peers, this would be a different Administration and a happier town today.