

WXPost JUL 28 1974
San Clemente: Hope Fades
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Signs of Despair
Strategy Lacking

By Lou Cannon

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SAN CLEMENTE, Calif.—The old reality of impeachment has finally broken through into the sunny confines of the presidential compound here, and Mr. Nixon's closest associates are now saying to each other that he can no longer survive.

"The week was a series of hammer blows," says one longtime associate of the President. "First, there was the defection of [Rep. Lawrence J.] Hogan, then the Supreme Court decision, then the realization that it is all over in the House. It begins to look as if we can't pull it out."

Officially, the White House repudiates this recognition that "it is all over." High administration officials have been instructed, presumably by Mr. Nixon himself, to say that the President is "confident" and to insist that he is going about his presidential duties without worrying whether he will be removed from office.

Chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. and press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, the two men who spend the most time with the President, maintain steadfastly that the full House will reject impeach-

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By Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward

Washington Post Staff Writers

The White House has failed to develop a coherent strategy to prevent President Nixon's impeachment and removal from office, according to presidential aides.

Members of the White House staff, often acknowledging their despair openly, say that there is little or no guidance from the President or his senior advisers in the efforts to save the Nixon presidency.

Interviews with more than a dozen White House aides and pivotal congressional Republicans reveal a picture of a presidential staff system in disarray and a President in isolation from the reality and momentum of the impeachment drive in Congress.

Those interviewed include members of the White House legal, speechwriting, congressional liaison and public relations.

Administration insiders concede that impeachment by the House is now almost inevitable, although the official White House position fails even to acknowledge the possibility.

In the interviews, two White House aides said privately that they believe the

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ment. White House strategy to prevent Mr. Nixon's removal by the Senate is not even under discussion, they say.

Unofficially, however, the signs are everywhere that Mr. Nixon is all but considered an ex-President in his once-supportive Southern California homeland.

At the San Clemente Inn, for instance, White House staff aides and Secret Service men were summarily evicted 10 days ago by Paul Presley, the owner and a longtime friend of Mr. Nixon.

"To the San Clemente Inn, there is no more White House and to the White House, there is no more San Clemente Inn," said Presley, who complained that various concessions to White House needs—including the use of the banquet room as a press center—had cost him \$100,000 during the Nixon presidency.

"We treated them like Jesus Christ just because they were the White House," Presley said.

Presley's decision to evict White House aides in favor of the summer tourists who provide the bulk of his business does not mean that he has repudiated the President. On the contrary, a sign facing the freeway on the inn marquee proclaims: "Mr. Nixon. To be great is to be misunderstood. Hang in there."

What the decision reflects, more than any abandonment of Mr. Nixon, is the growing realization of those tied to the economy of the western White House that there is very little profit left in the present administration.

It is a recognition that was reflected in a more general way by a Southern California banker, also an old Nixon friend, who listened and applauded Thursday when the President gave a 35-minute speech in Los Angeles calling upon Americans to join an "anti-inflation lobby" that would demand balanced budgets.

The banker said he liked the speech because of Mr. Nixon's renewed opposition to wage-price controls. But when he was asked about impeachment, he responded:

"I expect that he'll be impeached and removed from office, but I'm not too worried about it. Ford strikes me as very sound."

Even some of Mr. Nixon's most supportive personal friends, while sharing the President's belief that he has been brought down by his old political enemies and by the press rather than by wrongdoing, have reconciled themselves to his removal from office.

"I almost cried when I heard him," said the wife of one of these old friends who attended a dinner party for Mr. Nixon. "He looked so good and talked so well, and I realized that we might never see him as President again."

The dinner party, lavishly

staged at the Bel-Air estate first built for comedian W. C. Fields and now owned by Budget Director Roy L. Ash, was seen by some of those who attended as the last hurrah for Mr. Nixon. The President gave a warm, impromptu speech in which he said: "I can assure you that no man in public life — and I have studied American history rather thoroughly — has ever had a more loyal group of friends."

There have been no other dinners for Mr. Nixon outside the presidential compound. Usually, on his trips to San Clemente, the President enjoys slipping away to a favorite Mexican restaurant or going for a high-speed ride down the San Diego Freeway with his millionaire friend, C. G. (Bebe) Rebozo.

Rebozo, whose alleged involvement in the diversion

of campaign funds to Mr. Nixon's personal use has been a peripheral issue in the impeachment inquiry, is not here this time.

"The President misses Bebe because he's such good company," says another friend. "He likes having people around who don't talk at you."

Reportedly, Mr. Nixon has talked once or twice to Rebozo by telephone — although this has not been verified by the White House. One White House official did say, however, that Mr. Nixon had talked once on the phone to his indicted former chief of staff, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman.

The official described the conversation as a sympathy call and decried the "devil theory" that Haldeman remains a force in the administration.

The sole remaining force at San Clemente of any moment seems to be the President himself. He has spent more time in his office here than ever before, concentrating on foreign policy and economic issues — and receiving periodic reports on the ever-nearing impeachment.

These reports, at least until the Supreme Court decision, had been uniformly — and inaccurately — optimistic about impeachment. High-ranking White House aides report that Mr. Nixon was genuinely surprised and dismayed by the announcement last Tuesday by Hogan (R-Md.) that he would support impeachment — and that he responded in the "expletive-deleted" fashion now familiar from the White House transcripts. 23 f24

Another aide says that Mr. Nixon was "depressed" by the Supreme Court decision and especially so because it was written in behalf of a unanimous court by the man he had chosen to head it, Warren Burger.

The apparent effect of these back-to-back "hammer blows" has been to make Mr. Nixon more cognizant of the realities of impeachment. While White House officials say that Mr. Nixon has refused to watch the televised hearings of the House Judiciary Committee, these hearings are being carefully monitored by staff aides.

Mr. Nixon also has been reading the Los Angeles Times, where the impeachment issue has dominated the front pages, as well as his favorite and friendly Copley newspapers in San Diego, which traditionally have found silver linings in every cloud over the White House. Last week even the Copley papers featured stories which bluntly acknowledged that impeachment is becoming more of a reality with each passing day.

Confronted with a reality that he can neither deny nor discuss and with the absence of Rebozo and Haldeman, Mr. Nixon has spent more time than ever by himself. He has varied the office routine with long, sometimes solitary, walks on Red Beach. The other day, in Haig's solo company, he walked a mile down the beach, spent 30 minutes in the pounding surf and then walked the mile back to his presidential villa.

Mr. Nixon's advisers and his friends have found bright spots in this long summer of the President's discontent. One is Mr. Nixon's belated interest in the overheated economy, which aides now say he recognizes as a force that is undermining both his own governance and the country. Kenneth Rush, the President's economic counselor, was pleasantly surprised when Mr. Nixon allowed an economic meeting to run an hour and a half beyond its allotted course.

The other bright spot, at least on the surface, is President Nixon's health.

Though Dr. Walter Tkach, the President's physician, has anxiously watched for an recurrence of the phlebitis inflammation that plagued Mr. Nixon on his trip to the Soviet Union, all outward indications are that it has subsided. Mrs. Nixon's tanned, well-rested appearance contrasts pleasantly with the tired, harried impression he gave here last December when the full implications of the Watergate scandal were first becoming clear.

Then, a restless, drawn President roamed the San Clemente villa by night, intermittantly playing the piano and alarming the staff members who were closest to him.

There is none of this apparent restlessness now, although one aide remarks that he thinks Mr. Nixon has been frequently "depressed" by recent events. Another aide says that he sometimes, only occasionally, seems "disassociated" in his responses.

In the past when he seemed most concerned, Mr.

Nixon was given to public celebrations of his coolness under pressure. Now he is making no such claims for himself, and his staff is more impressed than ever before with what seems to be a genuine toughness.

"He has spent more time in public service than any other man," says Haig. "You have a great well of perspective and wisdom there, and I think it's given him an inner strength."

While the President has been engaged in his deeply personal struggle for survival, the White House has lavished extra attention on public relations efforts designed to influence the 15 newspapers, six magazines, four radio outlets, four wire services and three television networks represented on this two-week trip.

Haig has held two low-key cocktail parties at an attractive beach home adjacent to the presidential compound that he has leased from Presley, owner of the San Clemente Inn. There has been an unending round of events calculated to keep the attention of the press away from impeachment, ranging from such newsworthy happenings as Mr. Nixon's economic speech to such routine matters as the acceptance of the resignation of the ambassador to Mauritania.

There also has been a full round of briefings staged by deputy communications director Ken W. Clawson (before he returned to Washington last Friday) with White House officials of every rank and station.

"All you had to do was ask," said one veteran White House reporter, "and sometimes you didn't even have to do that. There have been briefings, conferences, meetings, interviews. They have been on the record, off the record, on background—anything you want."

This easy and continual access has helped to diffuse the focus of the assembled media on the Watergate scandal and impeachment. Reporters have been so busy they have not had time even for the handouts of free tickets to everything in sight—the Laguna arts festival, Disneyland, Lion Country Safari. However, a trace of reportorial skepticism lingers in the bulletin board postings of an Art Buchwald column suggesting that Ziegler is on leave of absence from his job as a Jungleland guide at Disneyland or of a Lichty cartoon that has the wife of a prison inmate saying to her husband during a visit: "Tell me, Mugsy . . . Have you met any of the old White House gang?"

For the most part, however, the White House publicists consider they have been successful in generating news from San Clemente that has little to do with the crisis that now confronts President Nixon.

But reality also has engulfed the press corps at the same time that news of the upcoming impeachment is invading the presidential compound on the sunswept shore of the Pacific. Fifteen miles north of the San Clemente Inn, several members of the press quietly have been evicted from their quarter at the Laguna Beach motel that has housed the White House press corps since the early days of the administration.

Here, too, the motivation is economic. President Nixon is planning one more trip to San Clemente—the provisional dates are the late August and early September period between the impeachment and the Senate trial—but the dollar-wise businessmen of Orange County know that there is little money left to be made from the presidential enterprise.

The richly carpeted press center at the Surf and Sand Motel in Laguna Beach has become part of a new restaurant known as the Boardwalk, which celebrates a turn-of-the-century motif and features pictures of primitive Laguna Beach outlying incongruously strewn amidst White House photographs.

But the literature advertising the new Boardwalk gives the game away.

"Our private meeting and banquet room is named the Press Corps Room in recognition of the members of the fourth estate," says the brochure. "The Press Corps Room seats 150 and is available for private gatherings. Here are displayed numerous photographs and mementos of President Nixon, his family, members of the press and numerous foreign dignitaries. If not in use, you may stroll through this room and view these historic photographs."

At Laguna Beach, as at San Clemente, both the Nixon administration and the press corps that covered it have already passed into history.

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President's chances of being acquitted in a Senate trial are diminishing.

Sources close to the Republican congressional leadership expressed similar assessments in interviews last week, observing that a total of 300 votes for impeachment in the 435-member House would make Senate conviction very likely.

Such a margin, they said, appears to be developing in the House, especially in what they say is the absence of any coordinated White House efforts to halt erosion of Mr. Nixon's support among members of his own party.

On Capitol Hill, according to sources there, some key Republicans in both House and Senate have been involved in tentative discussion about obtaining the President's resignation before an impeachment vote in the House.

Though discussing this more than a month ago, these leaders, who include Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) and House Republican leader John Rhodes (R-Ariz.), have dropped the subject for the time being in part to avoid a party bloodletting that would probably follow such a public suggestion or demand, according to several sources.

Rhodes, who apparently has not decided which way to vote on impeachment, "almost got into a fistfight" Tuesday night over impeachment with conservative Republicans who support the President, according to a participant in a Republican strategy session.

(Another participant said that the comment about a fistfight was an overstatement, but acknowledged that the meeting was very emotional. Rhodes could not be reached for comment.)

While some of the pro-Nixon Republicans complain that Rhodes is not showing any leadership against impeachment, they are more critical of the White House.

"Not only is there no arm-twisting," one House Republican said, "but there is nothing from the White House." An aide to a key Republican senator said the White House impeachment strategy "changes every 10 minutes, but it adds up to nothing."

Sources in both the White House and on Capitol Hill say the White House lobbying efforts, headed by presidential deputy William Timmons, have almost ceased in the House. "He has no ammunition and no guidance," said one Republican in touch with Timmons. "What little he and his staff are doing is strictly on their own, with no contact from anybody above his level."

"We're not dealing with reality," said another well-

placed presidential aide. He noted that the basic White House response to impeachment is mainly defensive and focused on public statements issued after events have occurred that damage the President's position.

In what appears to be a minority view on the White House staff, one presidential aide said Friday that "it is tempting to overstate the problem . . . (because) the best time to respond and develop a strategy is after the (House Judiciary) Committee votes."

But the same aide expressed the opinion that the White House has handled Watergate poorly for two years, and he voiced some doubt about the ability to devise a coherent plan at this late date.

For his part, the President has become increasingly isolated and appears to be putting off key impeachment policy decisions, according to White House insiders.

Presidential aides report that Mr. Nixon's basic attitude in the last week has been largely to ignore the problem.

According to two White House officials, Mr. Nixon has stopped reading his daily news summaries because they are so filled with news of Watergate and impeachment. However, the President has been watching some of the House Judiciary Committee impeachment debate on television sources said, although the White House has officially denied this.

Among members of the White House staff, there appears to be considerable concern that the President does not have an appraisal of the situation.

"What's happening really is that because of the pressure, he's walling himself off and won't face the pressure," one person close to the situation observed late last week.

Meanwhile, many of the President's aides are beginning to question Mr. Nixon's basic response to the impeachment question—delay. An aide in San Clemente, Calif., with the President said there have been a number of inconclusive meetings recently about impeachment, the aide added:

"The strategy is delay, of course, but there is some thinking that the quicker, the better . . . get the vote as fast as possible, but that is the complete opposite [from what is happening]."

But delay also has its difficulties, aides say. According to three separate White House sources, federal Judge John J. Sirica will find additional gaps, unexplained noises and other problems with the 64 presidential tape recordings which the Supreme Court ruled last week must be surrendered by the President to the Judge.

Members of the White House legal staff are also concerned that testimony

and evidence introduced at the conspiracy trial of six of Mr. Nixon's former aides—scheduled to begin in early September—could result in disclosures damaging to the President before or during a Senate trial of Mr. Nixon.

"To the degree that he (the President) had a chance in the Senate," one insider observed last week, ". . . his position can only deteriorate as time goes on. But he apparently feels differently."

One White House aide described the current White House difficulties as no longer merely related to Watergate or impeachment. "It's a governing problem, like someone ought to ask, 'Who's in charge?'"

Alexander M. Haig Jr., the White House chief of staff, has been preoccupied by Watergate problems in recent weeks, according to several former and present members of the White House staff, resulting in inattention to the day-to-day functioning of the White House.

They also say that despite Haig's reported awareness of the need for a new impeachment strategy, he too has conceded that none seems to be developing.

Apparently the only major White House response under consideration is for the President to again take his case to the people in a public address.

But even that plan appears to be extremely tentative, White House aides said.

On Capitol Hill, the absence of any new White House strategy is being regarded by some Republicans as a blessing.

"We all have to keep our distance now," one senior Republican leader in Congress said last week. "It is the same problem of (Vice President) Ford who needs to keep out of touch . . . when and if this (impeachment) explodes, it could get a lot of us. The fewer calls I get (from the White House) the better."

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According to White House sources, the problem of strategy has been compounded by bad intelligence the congressional relations staff has been getting from Capitol Hill in regard to expected votes by Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee.

Several weeks ago, the sources said, members of the White House staff felt certain there would be no more than three or four Republican Committee mem-

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bers — probably fewer — who would cast votes for impeachment. And, similarly, the White House had expected some help against impeachment from Southern Democrats that has not materialized, sources said.

The possibility of five to seven Republican votes for impeachment on the Committee — in the words of one White House source — “changes the entire complexion of the proceeding, giving it a disastrous, bipartisan appearance.”

It was just such a misreading of Republican sentiment, according to White House sources, that led to what they now regard as a serious blunder — the characterization of the Judiciary Committee as a “kangaroo court” by White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler.

The sources cited the Zie-

gler characterization as the result of what has largely become the decision-making process in the White House: Ziegler merely was called into the President's office and then emerged with his statement.

One source said last week that Ziegler and other top aides — including Mr. Nixon's chief Watergate counsel, James St. Clair — have

willingness to comply may have pushed the Supreme Court toward its unanimous decision against Mr. Nixon.

“The court was confronted with a President who might not obey (a ruling) and that must have driven them (the justices) to realize that the power of the court to rule on the law was in jeopardy,” one of the sources said.

not been spending much time with the President lately. And, instead of exchanging ideas and advice, most of the contact has been limited to “going in and getting an order every now and then,” according to the same source.

Two White House sources, citing the same example, said they were deeply perplexed by the White House

decision not to announce in advance that the President would comply with a Supreme Court ruling on the subpoena of 64 presidential tape recordings.

“The only person who raised the possibility of not complying was the President himself,” one said. Both noted that many members of the legal staff felt that failure to announce a

h Faced with that, the source said the court had a strong motive to reach a unanimous opinion, making it more difficult for the President to defy the ruling.

Whatever else is happening in a White House removed to California for two weeks, the consensus in interviews this week was that White House aides feel the impeachment sentiment —

not only in Congress but among the public — was snowballing.

“It may all end in a rush,” one Republican congressional source said, adding:

“The White House has lost its anchor and the back half of the ship has fallen off . . . but there is Nixon walking around as if it is another sunny day; well the sun might burn out.”