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Crowds Hold Vigil at the White House

By Haynes Johnson
Washington Post Staff Writer

The day after the cover-up finally fell apart, the limousines of the Cabinet officers were lined up on the driveway in a neat row outside the West Wing of the White House, and a large crowd had gathered at the gates.

They stood, three and four deep, peering through the iron fence toward the Executive Mansion. Behind them, across Pennsylvania Avenue in Lafayette Park, another crowd had gathered. They were standing, too, silently facing the White House.

It was a death watch, a wake, a sharing, it seemed, in a moment in history. In the end, after the morning hours had slowly ticked away in the sultry Washington weather, it was all anti-climactic.

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tained any official White House material held a few pages of part of the President's transcribed conversations with H. R. Haldeman just six days after the Watergate break-in that clearly showed Mr. Nixon had approved the cover-up for political reasons.

The reaction to those disclosures already had been devastating. The news had swept through Congress and the White House like a tidal wave the afternoon and evening before, leaving in its wake shock and anger and expressions of sorrow and betrayal.

What little remained of the President's hardcore support in the House had crumbled. Wiggins of California, Dennis of Indiana, Latta of Ohio, those Nixon stalwarts of only the week before in the impeachment inquiry, had come out against him publicly.

Now, in the morning, that reaction was continuing and the momentum was building.

At 9 o'clock on Capitol Hill the strongest anti-impeachment tiger on the Judiciary Committee had also capitulated. Charlie Sandman of New Jersey, who had rasped and snarled his way into the hearts of the true believers of the Nixon legions, was saying the new transcripts gave "hard proof" of criminality. He predicted that the House impeachment vote "will practically be unanimous."

Had they been surprised by the reaction to the new disclosures. Longer pause, then a response: It was about what they had expected.

More questions. Finally, he said, turning to leave: "I only came out to say hello and got ambushed."

"This is not a usual day, George," a reporter remarked. And another said: "You're the first real live White House staffer we've seen in eight days."

Gerald Warren, the deputy press secretary who has been making the official White House statements while Ronald Ziegler has been silent, passed by. Earlier, he had said there wasn't anything unusual about the Cabinet meeting; it was no emergency; it had been set up in advance. (So much in advance that some Cabinet officers didn't get the word the night before and Vice President Ford had to cancel a speech at 11 a.m. for it.)

Now it was after 11, and the Cabinet members and counselors had taken their places around the long table. Seated clockwise from the President's left they were: Schlesinger, Dent, Brinegar, Scali, Rush, Lynn, Butz, Simon, Ford, Saxbe, Brennan, Ash, Bush, Burch, Weinberger, Morton and Kissinger.

It is a mark of what had happened to the Nixon administration that few Americans, and probably few even in Washington, could list them all by title and full name.

The President didn't resign, the Cabinet was rallying around him, the constitutional process was grinding ahead.

It didn't begin that way. Inside the White House there was an air of expectancy. In the press room, where photographers congregated early, they were talking about Gerald Ford as if he were President. "So I'm going to say to Ziegler, 'You won't have us to kick around any more,'" one photographer said.

Aside from the unusually large press contingent present, there was little else evident to signify that this might be the day that signaled the end of the Nixon administration.

Only one piece of paper was posted on the bulletin board where the President's daily public business is listed. It told of only one event for the day:

He was among those who would vote for impeachment.

On Wall Street, that most sensitive indicator of the American mood, the stock market, was reacting wildly to the drumbeats of events.

By 10:30, after only half an hour of heavy trading, the market had risen dramatically by more than 25 points. The tickers carrying that news into the White House described the spurt as an "explosive" (Reuter) and "spectacular" (United Press International) rally. The Associated Press was more sober, but it made the main point: the rally was "sparked by renewed hopes for early resolution of Watergate and the attendant problems that have stymied the market for so many months."

In less circumspect language, it meant the market was anticipating the President's imminent departure from office.

On other days the news flowing across those White House tickers would have been significant: in Moscow, the Soviet Union was calling on the United States to abide by its commitments in settling international military conflicts; in Jordan, officials were denouncing their ally Egypt over the future of the West Bank of the Jordan River; in Athens, the leading Greek paper was beginning the first of a series of four editorials on "How the Americans Cheated Greece."

And in two of the world's most sor-

Inside, the waiting began for the anticipated denouncement. The press quarters are new, built in the Nixon period over what had been Franklin Roosevelt's swimming pool. While the decor is Swedish modern, the mementoes of the past are everywhere present: the pictures of Hoover and FDR and Truman with the old press corps, the letter from Ike addressed "to my favorite (and long-suffering travelling companions)" thanking them for a Christmas golfing gift in 1957.

One picture had a peculiar poignancy. It was of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon in silhouette, taken on Jan. 20, 1969, the last day of the Johnson presidency and the first of the Nixon era.

On it, LBJ had written: "To the White House press corps, eyewitness to the changing of the guard."

And eyewitness again, it seemed, under circumstances no one could have foreseen five years ago. A kind of gallows humor and morbid gossip was making the rounds. The night before, when Haig summoned the White House staff to discuss the bad news, one presidential adviser left the meeting singing "Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder." Then he added audibly: "Crash!"

At 12:30 the crowds inside the White House grounds and outside the gates had grown even larger. There was a stir as the doors opened and the Cabi-

"11:00 a.m. Cabinet meeting. The Cabinet Room."

Alongside was another bulletin board bearing the label: "Information from Mrs. Nixon's press office." Nothing was posted, nothing was scheduled.

Below, in the 14 boxes provided for presidential statements and releases, all but two were empty, and they already had played a fateful role in the history of the Nixon administration.

They contained what was left of the President's statement the afternoon before conceding that he had withheld critical Watergate information and that until last week "I did not realize the extent of the implications which the conversations might now appear to have." The only other box that con-

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rowful datelines there were reports of more turmoil and tragedy: in Bangladesh, floods were churning over that waif of a new country, leaving hundred dead, thousands homeless and the nation facing a cholera epidemic; in Saigon, the military communiques told of a rocket barrage directed by "Communist" troops at Danang—Danang again!—and of a "raging battle" with tanks attempting to capture the approaches to South Vietnam's second largest city.

But on this August day the world was watching the White House, the eye in the hurricane of the news.

Shortly before 11 o'clock the crowds were getting larger outside the iron fence, and the Cabinet officers were slowly moving indoors past the Marine guard at the portals of the West Wing. Cameras were set up on the grass facing the doors, and the press corps was quietly surveying the scene when George Joulwan walked outdoors.

He is the principal aide to Alexander M. Haig Jr., the President's chief of staff, and he had come out merely to say hello, he said.

He was immediately surrounded by reporters asking questions.

Yes, there had been a White House staff meeting at 8:30 that morning. They talked about the economy and about Cyprus. Yes, they talked about the President's situation. Had they talked about his resignation? Pause.

net officers began to trickle out. James T. Lynn, the Transportation Secretary, glanced briefly toward them and then walked hurriedly away down the steps toward the Executive Office Building.

William E. Simon, Frederick B. Dent and Peter J. Brennan next walked out. They hesitated as the press called out to them, and then walked slowly toward the cameras. A mob scene. Security went by the boards. Simon, who did most of the talking, was engulfed. In the pushing, milling crowd his words came through in fragments of phrases:

"The President sincerely believes he has not committed any impeachable offense. . . . He intends to stay. . . his firm resolve not to let the tragedy of Watergate obscure. . . . No Cabinet officer spoke of resignation. . . . He explained the revelations and disclosures. . . . the constitutional processes. . . . We've got lots of problems outside of this tragedy. . . ."

Threading his way slowly to his car, Brennan said: "He looked great. Everybody's staying on. We've got lots of work to do."

It was over—for now.

Outside the gates, voices in the crowd were shouting: "Tell us what happened. Tell us what happened."

He's not resigning, the Cabinet is with him, and the story is still continuing, they were told.



Crowd lines White House fence along Pennsylvania Avenue during President Nixon's Cabinet meeting. Afterward, the spectators were told the President is not resigning and the story continues.

By Douglas Cherrill—The Washington Post