

Dismay Pervades White House Staff

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Senior White House officials, stunned by President Nixon's admission of complicity in the Watergate coverup, are dismayed at his apparently steadfast refusal to resign, according to informed sources.

Mr. Nixon's principal deputies, including White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr., are thus moving toward independent assumption of day-to-day control of the executive branch, the sources said, while the President conducts what some top aides regard as a hopeless struggle to remain in office.

The intense loyalty once extended to Richard M. Nixon by his White House staff, Presidential aides reported yesterday, has now

shifted to the office of the presidency itself—and decisively away from its current occupant.

Sadness and pity, tempered sometimes by a sense of personal betrayal, are evident in the conversations now taking place in corridors and offices of the executive mansion.

But two other attitudes, revealed in extensive interviews with members of the White House staff in the past 48 hours, seem more pervasive: uncertainty, and a determination that the orderly process of government continue.

There are guarded statements and reluctant confirmations, generally in the most restrained language,

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that the President is under great psychological strain.

"I don't mean to be alarmist," one source with firsthand knowledge said, "and it has to be said delicately, but the President will not listen to anyone, not really listen . . . He's serene, I'd say serene, but not in touch with reality."

Privately, Haig has told high-level members of the White House staff that he perceives his mission as insuring that the decision-making requirements of the presidency be met in the absence of effective leader-

ship by Mr. Nixon.

Late Monday, more than 100 presidential aides and assistants rallied around the exhausted White House chief of staff, giving him an extended ovation when he told them that their task is to continue the business of government in a time of doubt and concern.

Significantly, informed sources reported, Haig made no explicit attempt to tie his function or that of the White House staff to Mr. Nixon's continuing determination to remain in office.

Following Haig's meeting with members of the White House staff, one presidential assistant observed: "We now have something more than a caretaker government, something less than government fully committed to Nixon as President."

Another senior aide, someone whose loyalty to the President has always been unflinching, compared Mr. Nixon's demeanor to that of Captain Queeg—the erratic Navy captain of the *Caine Mutiny*, relieved by his second-in-command as his ship swirled leaderless in the torrent of a typhoon.

One of the President's principal deputies was asked about the Captain Queeg characterization yesterday and answered that he would not quarrel with the comparison. "Just remember that the government will go on," he said.

In their conversations, presidential aides seemed particularly concerned about Mr. Nixon's apparent refusal to heed the counsel of some of his closest deputies that he should resign in order to save himself, if not the country, from what they regard as the agony of impeachment and trial by the Senate.

Even in the White House, it is difficult to find anyone who seriously believes the President would be acquitted by the Senate, according to these aides. But they come to varying conclusions about Mr. Nixon's perception of the situation.

One source with access to the President said Mr. Nixon seems realistic about his chances and expects to be removed from office. "But he is willing to be hu-

miliated by it," this source said. "It is almost as if he feels he has to be humiliated by it, to go down the road all the way."

Another White House aide, expressing the contrary view that the President is not yet convinced his situation is hopeless, said there is dismay on the presidential staff—but not resentment—about such an assessment by Mr. Nixon.

"He won't resign and we're accepting that," the aide said. "It's his decision and there is a great sympathy for his position . . . This is the man we've served and believed in for years."

Another White House aide cautioned that the situation could change at any given moment and predicted that the President will be forced to resign in coming weeks as he "becomes more aware" of the full weight of public and congressional pressure.

At this point, several persons close to the situation observed, Mr. Nixon seems to have made a concerted attempt to wall himself off from those of his former political supporters who are known to be counseling resignation.

They noted that when two of the President's top advisers, Watergate lawyer James D. St. Clair and speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, suggested through an intermediary to Mr. Nixon on Sunday that he consider resignation as his only viable alternative, the President responded in words to the effect that "I wish I had heard something else."

One person familiar with Sunday's meeting at Camp David observed afterwards: "He didn't quite understand all that. He wouldn't believe all this is happening."

Since then, another source said, the President has secluded himself "from the real political experts who would tell him . . . to take a walk. He won't talk to the people with the background and knowledge who would give him some straight advice."

Agreeing with this view, one White House aide said the President's admission of complicity in the Watergate cover-up has given Mr. Nixon a sense of relief at finally telling the truth—but that the President prefers not to dwell on its possible consequences.

After the release of the President's new self-incriminating tape transcript evidence on Monday, this aide said Mr. Nixon "walked as if a burden was lifted."

Another source spoke of President Nixon "living a lie-

for the last two years," during which he repeatedly insisted to the public he was ignorant of the Watergate cover-up. The same source said Mr. Nixon had privately assumed the same dogged

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insistence on his innocence in contacts with Cabinet officers, close aides, friends and congressional leaders. He even went to the extent, this source said, of "taking people by the lapels and shaking them to emphasize the point."

"It was a hoax," a different White House aide said yesterday, "a total hoax and I feel sorry for the man."

Referring to Mr. Nixon's statement Monday that "the record, in its entirety, does not justify the extreme step of impeachment and removal of a President," another source observed: "Somehow he thinks that his act of contrition is going to bring him absolution in the Senate . . . He is going to look ridiculous to all of us after a while."

Two high-level White House officials cautioned yesterday, however, that additional information damaging to Mr. Nixon is contained in at least one more of the 64 tape recordings the President has agreed, under a Supreme Court order, to surrender to U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica and, voluntarily, to the U.S. Senate for an impeachment trial.

In addition, both officials spoke of "astonishing" things that have happened in the White House in the past several months, and one said: "This last phase of the cover-up will be an amazing story."

The two officials indicated that the so-called "last phase" began on July 24, the date of the unanimous Supreme Court decision ordering that the 64 tapes be surrendered. The President, they said, argued with his senior aides that he should not comply with the court's order. ("He was the only one who considered defying the order," a presidential lawyer said, ". . . and that shows how far things had gone.")

Only after presidential counsel St. Clair had threatened to resign if Mr. Nixon refused to comply did the President agree to obey the court's order, the two officials said.

Then, two days later, Judge Sirica extracted a promise from St. Clair that the President's lawyer would listen to the tapes himself for the first time. Until that

point, the officials said, St. Clair had complained to colleagues that the President would not give him access to some evidence. Mr. Nixon had instead wasted St. Clair's time in long, rambling discussions during which the President insisted on making the key legal decisions, according to the officials.

But Sirica's order to St. Clair altered that situation and soon afterwards the President's lawyer learned the devastating contents of the June 23, 1972, tapes; Mr. Nixon's own recorded admission that he approved a cover-up of the facts of Watergate to hide involvement of his own aides.

Because the President had listened to these tapes this May, at a time when St. Clair was trying to fashion Mr. Nixon's anti-impeachment defense, St. Clair insisted that the President release transcripts of the damaging recordings, the officials said. And St. Clair also insisted that the transcripts be accompanied by a presidential statement making it clear that St. Clair was not a party to withholding such information from the House Judiciary Committee.

"The President readily agreed to St. Clair's request," one source said Monday.

Meanwhile, another source said this week that one of the President's attorneys has recommended that Mr. Nixon attempt to plea bargain with the special prosecutor's office, exchanging his resignation for immunity from prosecution. It is not known whether that recommendation has reached the President.

Expressing what appeared to be a consensus of the White House staff, one middle-level White House aide said yesterday: "We're ready for an orderly transition of power — whenever that comes."