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, with access to White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr., are thus moving toward an 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, aides and assistants reported yesterday, has now shifted to the office of the presidency itself—and decisively away from its current occupant.

Pity and piety, 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 sincere, I’d say sincere, but not in touch with reality.”

Privately, Haig has told high-level members of the White House staff that he perceives his mission as inuring to the decision-making requirements of the presidency be met in the absence of effective leadership by Mr. Nixon.

Nixon seems realistic about the President would be acquitted by the Senate, according to one informed source, 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 the President’s statement Monday that "the record, in its entirety, does not justify the extreme step of impeachment and removal of a President," a source said, "he thinks that his act of conviction is going to bring him absolution in the Senate . . . He is going to look ridiculous, but he is going to remain in office.

Two high-level White House officials cautioned yesterday, however, that additional information damaging to Mr. Nixon is contained in at least six more tapes which, when the recordings the President has agreed to release under a Supreme Court order, to surrender to U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica, are to be furnished to the Senate.

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 distance himself 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 afterward: "He didn’t quite understand all that. He wouldn’t believe all this is happening.

Since then, another source said, the President has re-emphasized “from the real political point of view, that we would him . . . to take a walk. He won’t talk to the people with whom he is not familiar and knowledge who would give him some straight advice.

Agreeing with this view, one White House aide said the President has assumed the same doggedness for the last two years, during which watergate had persisted to the public he was ignorant of the Watergate coverup in its entirety. This aide said Mr. Nixon had privately assumed the same doggedness that leads the two officials "somewhat out of the stages phase," began on July 24, the date of the unanimous Supreme Court order directing that the 64 tapes be surrendered.

The President, they said, would not comply with the court’s order, adding that the only one who could decide the order, a presidential lawyer in the same source that shows how far things had gone.

"Only after a presidential cease St. Clair had threaten 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 if the President’s lawyer would "be present at the time he 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."