

See also 27 Aug 74, SFC, "Ford, Nixon and Chain of Command."

A Ticklish Time--Nixon's Final Days

Washington

During the last days of President Nixon's term, the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff kept a close watch to make certain no orders were given to military units outside the normal chain of command.

The tighter watch by Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger and the Joint Chiefs was based on hypothetical situations that could arise during a period when President Nixon's hold on the presidency was not clear.

Specifically, there was concern that an order could go to a military unit outside the chain of command for some sort of action against Congress during the time between a House vote for impeachment and a Senate trial on the impeachment charge.

Asked later yesterday about the close watch, Schlesinger said, "In keeping with my statutory responsibilities, I did assure myself that there would be no question about the proper constitutional and legislated chain of command, and there never was any question."

The Defense Department had no evidence to indicate there was any White House plan to use military units on its own. Instead it based its watch over the military on various theories of improbable circumstances that could arise. The circumstances never arose.

The special precautions were accomplished by passing the word to make sure that no military commander took an order that came from the White House or elsewhere and did not come down through military channels.

Of particular interest to Defense Department officials, it was known, was the Air Force and its officers. The Air Force was known to have a special loyalty to Mr. Nixon because of his efforts in bringing home Vietnam prisoners of war, who were heavily Air Force pilots.

The Defense Department also paid close attention to the atmosphere in meeting places of military officers and found that the prevailing sentiment was in favor of a constitutional removal of Mr. Nixon, if it came to that. The surveillance turned up no evidence of any plot of any kind.

The Joint Chiefs were understood to have been solidly in favor of the chain of command precautions.

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