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Reins of State

President Johnson is striving for a sound objective in attempting to bring the many reins of Latin American policy into a single pair of hands. He would give his new Assistant Secretary of State for inter-American affairs a double job to obtain this result—Thomas C. Mann is expected to serve both as an Assistant to the President and as an officer within the State Department. Yet this two-hat arrangement raises some difficult questions.

There are other instances of State Department officials serving as presidential advisors—Ambassador-at-large Thompson, for example, acts as a White House advisor on Soviet affairs. But to our knowledge there has been no other instance of a State Department official with major administrative responsibilities holding a formal title as a White House Assistant.

The case for the innovation rests on the multiple-agency sprawl involved in regional policy. Since the Cuban missile crisis, there has been a Latin American Policy Committee, which brings together the State and Defense Departments, the CIA, USIA and AID. All of these agencies are involved in hemisphere affairs, but no single official can speak with the same kind of authority that an Ambassador overseas has as chief of a mission. Making Mr. Mann a White House Assistant would, in effect, make him the mission chief.

The case against the arrangement is that it may dislocate the chain of command in the State Department. Mr. Mann would be both a subordinate to the Secretary of State and a co-equal by virtue of his rank in the White House. Or at least it would seem that way to Africans and Asians, who would rarely covet similar arrangements for U.S. officials dealing in their area.

Still, in the end, the test will be whether the new arrangement works. It may be wiser to welcome President Johnson's innovation rather than become bogged in the one game Washington finds endlessly fascinating—the game of reorganizing the Government.