

Post 11/16/73

# Justice Department Puts On Brave Face

WASHINGTON (AP) — Raw from the wounds of Watergate, the Justice Department is putting on a brave face and turning inward to mend.

It was to have been the show piece for a law and order President. It became a house beset by one morale-shattering upheaval after another.

As the scandal unfolded with the spring, one attorney general was accused of crimes and other standard bearers were accused of impropriety. The mood was glum.

President Nixon turned then to Elliot L. Richardson and William D. Ruckelshaus, two administration men who stood untouched and generally regarded as honorable, truthful, upright. They were sent as the rescuers to convince a doubting public that Justice, too, housed those virtues.

"There was a ferment of ideas, an enthusiasm they generated," an associate recalls now.

With Richardson as attorney general and Ruckelshaus as his deputy, debate bounced incessantly around the burnished walnut conference table. Memos flew like wildfire.

Gone were the days of John N. Mitchell, Nixon's first attorney general, a man now accused of violating the law he was supposed to enforce.

Gone were the 10 months of Richard Kleindienst, a man who resigned as the scandal lapped close to him.

And gone now are Richardson and Ruckelshaus, who promised justice devoid of politics, promised a Watergate investigation free of outside pressure, and quit as the ultimate act to keep the vow.

Richardson made it his mission to restore public confidence in the Justice Department in a campaign of speeches backed up step by step with action. There were indications he was succeeding.

There were even stronger indications that he had cheered disheartened employes languishing for a champion.

Ten days ago, cheer abruptly turned to despair. Ranking officials considered resigning but kept their agony to themselves.

"Where do we go from here? I don't know. No one knows. It's too soon," mourned a division head.

As the week wore on, ranking officials agreed to stay in answer to urgent pleas from Solicitor General Robert H. Bork who became acting attorney general and assumed responsibilities his academic training left him ill-prepared to handle.

With the Watergate case dominating his attention, he urged department officials to

carry on as they could have under Richardson.

The uncertainty of a caretaker chief now is compounded by Bork's avowed position on the restructured Watergate investigation and the special prosecutor he is soon to appoint.

Just as Richardson did with the first prosecutor, Bork says he will tolerate no interference with the investigation and the man running it. As did Richardson he suggests he would resign rather than compromise the probe.

If Bork avoids a confrontation forcing him to quit, he could remain for months as acting attorney general. The President seems unlikely to nominate a successor, subject to Senate confirmation, until smoother sailing is in sight on Capitol Hill.

In view of the long uncertain months ahead, Justice Department officials were left guessing about the future of Richardson's pet projects.

Some undoubtedly will collapse, but Richardson himself soon will write Bork urging him to press forward with proposals key to the depoliticizing effort.

Personal advisers to Richardson and Ruckelshaus have agreed to stay at the depart-

ment long enough to wrap up details of those projects and ease the transition.

Department sources say that one of the most important projects — a top to bottom review of the FBI — probably will continue but may not be carried as far as Richardson and Ruckelshaus wished.

FBI Director Clarence M. Kelley has cooperated with the internal review, but has never pushed it.

Richardson's departure also cast doubt on the fate of legislation he intended to propose to Congress to guard computer files maintained by the FBI and other government agencies from outside snoopers.

The proposal, designed to protect individual rights to privacy, has been circulated to other government agencies for comment and would have been sent to Congress within a few months. Sources said the White House so far has taken no position on it.

Richardson had planned to announce last week a tentative proposal for removing the political endorsements traditionally required for the appointment of federal judges.

He plans to make the same proposal as a private citizen.