

President Disputes Richardson Version Of Cox Firing Role

By Lou Cannon
Washington Post Staff Writer

A new conflict appeared to be developing last night between the White House and former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson. It was based on reports that President Nixon or his chief of staff had told Republican senators that Richardson was untruthful about his role in the ouster of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

The Associated Press reported flatly that Mr. Nixon claimed that Richardson had "lied in sworn testimony" when he told the Senate Judiciary Committee that he had opposed a White House

order calling upon Cox to stop using the judicial process to obtain White House tapes and documents relating to the Watergate scandal.

According to the AP account, the matter was discussed with senators on Tuesday night and in greater detail on Wednesday night.

But the story was immediately denied by the White House and none of the senators at the Wednesday-night meeting would confirm it. A spokesman for Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.) said that Hatfield would neither confirm nor deny the report.

Ken W. Clawson, the White House deputy communications director, issued a statement that said:

"White House officials said tonight that the unidentified senators quoted in the Associated Press story obviously misunderstood President Nixon's remarks concerning Attorney General Elliot Richardson.

"What the President told the senators was that there are several versions of the events that led up to the discharge of former special prosecutor Archibald Cox and that Mr. Richardson was simply articulating one of these versions.

"The President said that Elliot Richardson was on board all the way and that he did not know until . . . Saturday that he had changed his mind," Cook said. ". . . I turned to the President and looked right at him and said, 'Mr. President, if there is a discrepancy and you can establish it, you should do so, because right now the people in this room are more interested in you than Mr. Richardson.'"

In contrast to the White House version, Richardson insisted that he had consistently opposed restrictions placed on Cox and that he had telephoned White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. the day of Cox's dismissal to argue that it would be a mistake to restrict the investigation.

The AP account said that Haig, at the meeting with senators Wednesday, said that Richardson's sworn account would be perjury. White House officials said that the word "perjury" was used in a question by one senator and then repeated by Haig.

Sen. Marlow Cook (R-Ky) said the issue came up at the Tuesday night meeting in response to a question by Sen. Edward Gurney of Florida.

"The President said that Elliot Richardson was on board all the way and that he did not know until . . . Saturday that he had changed his mind," Cook said. ". . . I turned to the President and looked right at him and said, Mr. President if there