

Haig Declines To Testify On Richardson

By Spencer Rich
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Sen. Charles McC. Thias Jr. (R-Md.) said yesterday that White House staff chief Alexander M. Haig Jr. has declined an invitation to back up his charge that former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson did not tell Congress the truth about his role in the firing of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.

Mathias released a letter dated Dec. 12 from Haig saying further dispute over the matter "can serve no constructive purpose" and disclaiming any intention to discredit Richardson, "impugn his integrity or cast doubt on his veracity."

Mathias interpreted the letter as a concession by Haig that his charges against Richardson, made at a White House session with senators Nov. 14 at which

Mathias was present, couldn't be substantiated.

"Gen. Haig has elected to let Elliot Richardson's testimony stand without contradiction on the subject of the circumstances that led to the firing of Archibald Cox," said Mathias.

"Although he indicated that there may be a difference of perceptions of some facts, he does not wish to challenge the thrust or motivation of Richardson's version of the story," the Maryland senator continued.

The dispute goes back to the Oct. 20 firing of Cox on orders of President Nixon. Richardson resigned in protest and subsequently told the Senate Judiciary Committee, on which Mathias serves, that he has never agreed with a White House plan to bar Cox from using the courts to obtain confidential presidential Watergate documents.

At the Nov. 14 White House meeting, and at a similar session a day earlier, the President said Richardson has agreed to bar Cox from using the courts to obtain documents. Haig at the Nov. 14 session specifically said the barrier to Cox was actually Richardson's idea.

Haig said Richardson changed his story when he decided to resign. When reminded by Mathias that Richardson had given a contradictory story under oath, Haig reportedly told the Nov. 14 meeting, "I have read Elliot's testimony and it is not true."

Mathias subsequently received from Richardson a draft memorandum of an agreement being proposed to Cox during the hectic week before he was fired. It contained a Richardson-drafted paragraph that the White House shouldn't pose automatic barriers to Cox's use of the courts to obtain documents.

Saying this proved Richardson's version of the story, Mathias wrote to ask Haig whether he wished to pose any further challenge to Richardson's account. Mathias made clear that if Haig persisted in his original story, he would seek to have him called before the committee to testify under oath.

In his response, Haig didn't specifically retract his version of the story, but he said he didn't doubt Richardson's integrity or veracity. "It is not unique that several people, bent on the mutual goal of resolving a problem rather than contemporaneously recording their actions, will differ in their recollection of events leading up to a decision," Haig wrote.