

Sobered Saxbe reshaping his image

By John Hall
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WASHINGTON — The sign over the attorney general's desk gleamed like a warning light.

"The bunk stops here," it said.

Atty. Gen. William Saxbe finished signing a few papers on his desk, and leaned back a bit stiffly in his swivel chair.

Gone was the plug of tobacco in his cheek. No package of Mail Pouch was in sight. And his feet were planted firmly on the floor

instead of on the desk—or in his mouth, as some people have said.

Bill Saxbe—he, of the tart tongue and quotable quote—is trying to hold in these days.

Mainly he is succeeding. In a half-hour interview in his office last week, he answered only one Republican governor and did not utter a single cuss word.

That is a dramatic change from those free-wheeling days last spring when he said Patricia Hearst was a common crim-

inal before she had been charged with a crime, observed that Jewish intellectuals were "very enamored" with the Communist Party in the McCarthy era and popped off without inhibition about all the issues of the day at his Wednesday morning coffee clatches with reporters.

Saxbe, as a senator, got used to being blunt. After the Christmas season bombing of Hanoi in 1972, he said then-President Nixon was "out of his f— mind."

Reporters covering the Justice Department when he

came aboard loved it. The plain-spoken, no-nonsense talk was a refreshing change.

But after being zinged by editorial writers and civil liberties groups for his un-lawyerlike comments last spring, Saxbe canceled his Wednesday morning coffee with reporters, his public relations men breathed a sigh of relief, he went into hiding to lick his wounds, and reporters put a dart board in the press room to relieve their boredom.

Saxbe has begun re-emerging within the last few

weeks for informal chats with newsmen, but the old crustiness is gone.

In fact, Saxbe's policy is not to comment on matters that are not under his immediate jurisdiction. His responses to most questions are given in one sentence with a long pause for the next question. A monitor from the public relations staff sits by tape recording the whole proceeding—a constant reminder that whatever he says may be used against him.

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