

The Kleindienst Case

Ideally, an Attorney General should be a lawyer, highly regarded for his professional attainments and wise, discriminating judgment. Although aware of political necessities, he ought not be a partisan in a narrow or combative sense. To the President, he should be a sagacious counselor able to take a long view in the rush of immediate events. To the public, he should be—along with the members of the Supreme Court—one of the ultimate guardians of justice.

It is sad but not historically unprecedented that Richard G. Kleindienst, whose confirmation is now under Senate debate, falls short of these high standards. At least half of the men who have headed the Justice Department in its long history have failed to meet them. Mr. Kleindienst is a lawyer of no particular distinction and a routine politician. But those facts do not preclude his confirmation inasmuch as American tradition gives a President wide latitude in choosing his Cabinet advisers.

Furthermore, it is only to be expected that Mr. Kleindienst holds regressive opinions on civil liberties and civil rights. In view of President Nixon's own law-and-order attitudes, the choice of a more liberal lawyer as successor to John N. Mitchell could not be expected.

The issue then for the Senate and the nation is whether Mr. Kleindienst falls so far below an acceptable standard of competence, political involvement and leadership quality as to override the prevailing presumption in favor of any Presidential nominee. Reluctantly, we conclude that Mr. Kleindienst does fall below this minimum standard.

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His personal integrity in a financial sense is not in dispute. What is seriously doubted is the integrity of his judgment when public interest and party interest collide. There is a high risk, perhaps a probability, that if Mr. Kleindienst is confirmed and serves for any considerable time as Attorney General, he will reduce the morale and efficiency of the Justice Department to the demoralized condition which it reached twenty years ago at the end of the Truman era.

The experience of the Truman Administration is relevant and disturbing. President Truman appointed three successive Attorneys General, none of them personally corrupt but none of them professionally eminent or invulnerable to political influence. Each in turn was a shade more mediocre and, in varying ways, more political-minded than his predecessor. The result by 1953 was a flight of the competent employes and a rotting away of the spirit of those who remained.

Former Attorney General Mitchell, except in the field of municipal finance, is not professionally distinguished. He is an able man but his guidance of the Justice Department was unduly influenced by short-run political calculations. Mr. Kleindienst's professional accomplishments are less visible than those of his predecessor and his political manipulations and preoccupations even more obvious. In short, his tenure would almost certainly lead to a quickening of the downward spiral within the department. When young and middle-level career employes lose confidence in the professional capacity and freedom from political subservience of the department's leadership, the destructive attitudes of cynicism and resentment rapidly gather force.

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The six weeks of Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on Mr. Kleindienst's nomination were inconclusive on many issues of fact. But they wrote a compelling indictment of the nominee as evasive, disingenuous and crass. He consistently tried to conceal the extent and nature of his involvement in the politically motivated I.T.T. settlement which undercut an important legal position that the Antitrust Division had been asserting for two and one-half years.

In the bribery case involving Robert T. Carson, administrative assistant to Senator Fong of Hawaii, the most that can be said for Mr. Kleindienst's peculiar actions is that he must be remarkably obtuse. Mr. Carson allegedly offered Mr. Kleindienst a large political contribution in exchange for quashing a criminal case, but Mr. Kleindienst did not report the matter for a week and only after learning that the F.B.I. was "bugging" Mr. Carson's office. In the Stewart case involving the flagrant obstruction of justice in a San Diego investigation of illegal political contributions Mr. Kleindienst joined in hushing up the affair.

Men can grow as Attorney General as other men grow as President. When Robert Kennedy was appointed in 1961, he seemed a person of narrow views and inadequate experience, but in almost every respect he rose to the challenge of his high office. It is possible to believe that Mr. Kleindienst would respond similarly. Yet there is little in his record to encourage that hope and much to suggest that it would be unwise to take the chance. A vote to confirm would be a vote in favor of that gamble. A vote to reject would be a vote to protect a great department of government from probable decline and demoralization. On balance, the Senate should prefer to be safe than sorry. It should tell Mr. Nixon that he can do better, that the nation deserves better than Richard Kleindienst as Attorney General.