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U.S. OUSTS CHIEF OF LEGAL AGENCY

Dismissed Director Assails
Head of Poverty Office
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 12—A new political controversy erupted Monday night over the Federal Legal Services Program with the abrupt discharge of its acting director, Ted R. Tetzlaff, following his refusal to resign.

The dismissal came only hours after the American Bar Association's policy-making body endorsed higher funding for the program and urged that it be insulated from political pressures.

Mr. Tetzlaff, who is 28 years old, said his dismissal was part of an effort "to kill the program—or at least to interject politics into the work of anti-poverty lawyers and destroy their professionalism."

He directed his accusation against Howard Phillips, the new acting director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, the parent agency of the Legal Services Program. Mr. Phillips refused to comment.

It is known, however, that Mr. Phillips, an avowed conservative, has strongly opposed some aspects of the program, one of the most successful—and controversial—initiatives of the Great Society programs of the Johnson Administration. Frequently embattled, it has won wide support even from conservative lawyers.

Has 2,500 Lawyers

The program involves 2,500 lawyers working out of 900 neighborhood offices in 300 cities around the country. The Administration reaffirmed its support of a plan, first proposed last year, to establish the program as an independent public corporation, thus insulating it from politics.

This corporation would also provide a home for the program, which otherwise would be orphaned by the Administration's proposed abolition of the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Federal antipoverty agency.

Mr. Tetzlaff, who has been acting director for a year, is the third head of the program in 27 months to leave under fire. Previously, Terry F. Lenzner and Fred Speaker departed after contesting asserted political pressures. In Mr. Speaker's case, criticisms of the program had been raised by Vice President Agnew.

Mr. Tetzlaff said Monday night that his dismissal was only the latest in a series of "acts of political interference" undertaken by Mr. Phillips since he took over O.E.O. two weeks ago.

Questions Qualifications

Another such act, he said, was Mr. Phillips's installation of a number of officials into legal services headquarters whom he called "of questionable qualification." He cited the appointment by Mr. Phillips of a new chief of evaluation—Marshall Boardman.

"That's the most professionally demanding position in the program," Mr. Tetzlaff said, "yet here he appoints a man who is not even a lawyer."

Last week Mr. Phillips abolished the National Advisory Committee to the Legal Services Program. This 34-member committee has served, since the antipoverty agency began in 1965, as a link among the professional bar, poor people receiving legal services and the Government.

The new acting director of the program is Lawrence McCarty, who was recently recruited to the O.E.O. by Mr. Phillips from a New England life insurance company.

Mr. Phillips, a founding member of the conservative Young Americans for Freedom, has expressed a variety of philosophical objections to the operation of the program. He has challenged it as serving the liberal impulses of its lawyers rather than the real needs of the poor. He has been critical, for example, of some offices producing newsletters that he contends have wrongly engaged in partisan politics.