

Richardson Switch Leaves Pentagon in State of Shock

By Michael Getler

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For the fourth time since he became President, Richard M. Nixon has reached out to 52-year-old Elliot L. Richardson to take over another of the hottest spots in government.

The President's surprise announcement yesterday that Richardson, who has been Secretary of Defense for three months, would be nominated immediately to take over as Attorney General and lead the government's Watergate investigation has left the Pentagon in a state of shock.

The President's action has set in motion a search for a successor to the urbane Bostonian who, since January, secretary of state, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and Secretary of Defense.

In each of these jobs, Richardson has gained a reputation within government for considerable management skill and personal integrity, and these attributes undoubtedly would serve the President well at a time when his administration is being rocked by scandal.

Richardson has also demonstrated a talent for explaining the administration's position on a number of touchy and controversial issues.

Most recently, he has been the major spokesman for the President on the legality of continued U.S. bombing in Cambodia. Many critics of that policy—who contend there is no authority for such continued attacks—concede that Richardson is about the best man the administration could have to defend its moves.

If Richardson is quickly confirmed by the Senate and moves across the river to the Justice Department before a new Defense Secretary is nominated, the Pentagon will be run in the interim by Deputy Secretary of Defense William P. Clements.

Clements, 55, is a former Texas oil drilling contractor who has taken a very hard-line position over the years on the need for a strong defense. He, too, has been at the Pentagon for only three months after being appointed on White House orders.

During his Senate confirmation hearings, Clements said he had "no reason to believe" the Russians were not seeking to develop a first-strike nuclear knockout capability against the U.S., adding that his number one objective would be to reverse what he sees as coming Soviet military dominance.

As deputy, Clements

shares all of the powers of the Secretary of Defense, and is one of the candidates for the top slot. However, a number of officials said the search for a successor is focused mostly outside the Pentagon and estimated the chances at better than even that someone other than Clements would get the post.

On the other hand, one top official estimated it might be very hard to find anyone willing to sign up for the Pentagon at this time.

The Defense Department is having considerable trouble filling its top-level jobs, even with Richardson at the helm. His departure is expected to compound that problem, particularly if, as expected, he takes his top aides with him.

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Concern over Richardson's departure and his successor was expressed at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing yesterday by Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) Symington, acting chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said he would prefer someone like Richardson to head Defense, and not someone from the "military-industrial complex."

With Clements having worked mostly on procurement problems and relations with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Richardson's departure might also leave the Pentagon without an experienced top policy spokesman. Very much in the minds of those searching for a new secretary is the fact that two major meetings with NATO are scheduled in May and June during President Nixon's "year of Europe" while another key meeting of defense ministers is set for South Korea in July.

Because of the heavy emphasis the administration and Richardson have sought to put on Europe and on U.S. foreign assistance programs in general, there was some speculation that Under Secretary of State Kenneth Rush, a former deputy defense secretary, may be a candidate for the top Defense job.

Dr. James R. Schlesinger, the new CIA director, was also included in speculation.

Though Richardson, in his short tour at the Pentagon, defended all the major new weapons programs in the Pentagon's \$80 billion budget and cautioned against still growing Soviet and Chinese military power, he still managed to retain his liberal Republican image.

Because of this, Richardson generally was able to maintain good relations with both hawks and doves, and with military specialists at the State Department,

White House and elsewhere in government.

Richardson indicated to newsmen yesterday that he learned of his new assignment during weekend discussions with the President at Camp David. He said he would remain at the Pentagon until confirmed for the Justice Department role; but that in the interim he would try to learn as much as he could about his new assignment.

Richardson is a Harvard Law School graduate, a former clerk to 2d Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Learned Hand and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, and a former Massachusetts lieutenant governor and attorney general.

A Richardson speech just three weeks ago before the Harvard Law School Association in New York now seems prophetic for the man assigned to "uncovering the whole truth" about Watergate.

After being introduced as the new Secretary of Defense who has had 17 jobs, 11 of them in government, Richardson said that law school training is supposed to create "experts in relevance." He said that he could not have made those changes "had I not been able to transfer from one to another without some ability to discern—in a welter of data—those facts truly relevant to reaching a significant judgment about how to get from where we are now to a place somewhere closer to where we want to be.

While at HEW, Richardson was criticized by some for defending administration positions on school busing and welfare reform that he personally did not favor.

Yet Richardson's more numerous supporters contend that his positions on these issues and others were made well known and that he was at least able to voice reservations without loss of influence.

Richardson has resulted in some similar criticism. In his first press conferences, Richardson held out the possibility some cuts could be found in the military budget, but he retreated quickly to a position that reviews had failed to turn up any "fat."

To shut off talk of big cuts he argued that despite an end to U.S. involvement in Vietnam and an initial agreement with the Soviets to limit nuclear arms, proposals for large reductions would weaken the U.S. in further negotiations with the Communist powers on arms and troop cuts in Europe. Some of those negotiations could go on for years, keeping the defense budget high all the while.