

Lawyer for President

James Draper St. Clair

By JOHN KIFNER

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BOSTON, Jan. 4—James Draper St. Clair and his wife had slipped away to Florida for a Christmas to New Year's holiday, but even as the bellhop was pitting the key into the door of their room at the Innsbrook Resort at Tarpon Springs, near Tampa, the telephone was ringing.

It was Gen. Alexander M. Haig, the White House chief of staff, asking Mr. St. Clair to become President Nixon's new lawyer in charge of the Watergate case.

In the 53-year-old Bostonian, Mr. Nixon has found a man whose strength, colleagues say, lies in the solidness of his preparation. And he is no stranger to Washington controversy. As a young lawyer, Mr. St. Clair was a member of the staff of Joseph N. Welch, special counsel for the United States Army, whose clashes with Senator Joseph R. McCarthy during the televised hearings in 1954 helped bring an end of the "McCarthy Era."

Robert W. Meserve, the past president of the American Bar Association, who has tried cases against Mr. St. Clair here, recalled today with a chuckle that he was "too damn able for my taste."

'Willing to Work'

"He's unusually well prepared, a quick thinker, a natural cross-examiner, which many lawyers aren't," Mr. Meserve said. "He's willing to work and well prepared and it sticks out all over his work product. He knows how every question keys into the question he wants to prove."

Mr. St. Clair prepares his arguments by writing them in longhand on yellow legal pads, sometimes crumpling the sheet up and throwing it at a waste basket across the room when the thought is not good enough. Then, in court, he argues without using notes.

"I've seen him work for hours and hours on his arguments," his wife, the former Billie Nestle, recalled this afternoon. "Many's the time I've seen him get up at 5 A.M. and work to 8 A.M. When judges compliment him on the way he tries a case, that's why. There are no ragged edges."

Mr. St. Clair wears the conservative grays of a Boston lawyer, relieved occasionally by a bow tie. Mr. Meserve says that Mr. St. Clair uses reading glasses to good effect, "looking over them like a foxy grandpa."

Mr. St. Clair, an enrolled Republican, is a senior partner in the Boston firm of Hale & Dorr. Late this afternoon, Paul S. Helmuth, managing partner of the firm, issued the following statement:

"We are greatly honored that our partner, James D. St. Clair, was asked to



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Prepares his cases in precise detail.

undertake this important professional responsibility. In connection with this assignment, Mr. St. Clair has resigned and withdrawn from all connection with Hale & Dorr, effective Jan. 2, 1974."

Mr. St. Clair, who was born in Akron, Ohio, on April 14, 1920, attended Augustana College in Illinois for two years, then went on to the University of Illinois, graduating in 1941. He entered Harvard Law School that fall, but left in the spring to join the Navy.

During World War II, he served aboard Patrol Craft 777, based at San Pedro, Calif., where he met the young woman he married in 1944. After the war, he returned to Harvard, graduating in 1947, and joined Hale & Dorr.

As a young lawyer, he worked under Mr. Welch and gained the trust and admiration of the older man, who invited him to help during the McCarthy hearings. Just before he went to Washington, he won local attention in what is known as the "Cranberry Case" by winning treble damages — \$525,000 — for Cape Cod Food Products of Hyannis in an antitrust suit.

The St. Clairs live in a colonial house atop one of the higher hills in the well-to-do suburb of Wellesley Hills, west of Boston. They have three children, Peggy, 24, a graduate of Tufts University who is to finish her studies at Boston College Law School this spring; Scott, 20, a junior at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, and Tom, 16, a sophomore at the Belmont Hills School.

Mr. St. Clair enjoys swimming and reading historical works, but his real love is golf. "He'd like to play 18 holes and then just another nine because it's so beautiful or so much fun," Mrs. St. Clair said. She added that his handicap was 11, then quickly said, "Oh, my goodness, I hope I've got that right. I'll have signed my own death warrant."