ersen Retiring on Dec.

By Bob Kuttner Washington Post Staff Writer

Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen, a key figure in the original Watergate investigation, is retiring at the end of this year, it was announced by the White House and the Justice Department yesterday.

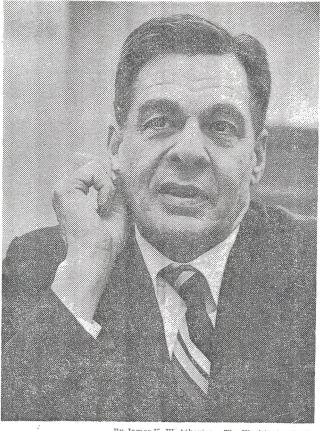
Attorney General William B. Saxbe said in a statement praising Petersen that "his decision to retire is completely his own." Saxbe reportedly tried to persuade Petersen to remain until mid-1975. White House press secretary Ron Nessen also told reporters, Petersen had not been asked to resign.

As head of the Criminal Division, Petersen was in charge of the original Watergate investigation until the Special Prosecution Force was set up in June, 1973. He was later criticized when White House tape transcripts revealed that he had passed along Watergate grand jury reports to President Nixon in April, 1973, a time when Mr. Nixon's top aides were the investiga-tion's prime targets.

memorable exchange that the original team of prosecutors "was on the verge of breaking that case wide open" when Archibald Cox was named special prosecutor.

Petersen was again again briefly in charge of the investigation after Cox was fired a year ago in what came to be called the Saturday Night Massacre. And he stirred renewed controversy when the White House transcripts were made public last spring. Petersen is on the list of witnesses to testify at the Watergate cover-up trial in the next several weeks.

Speaking to reporters yes terday, Petersen said his credibility as head of the Criminal



tion's prime targets.

According to several close associates, Petersen, who received a pin for 30 years of federal service last month, had wished to retire as early as 1972 or 1973, but did not wish to leave amid criticism.

Division was probably impaired by Watergate, but denied that this was a factor in his resignation. After 27 years

Department be
By James K. W. Atherton—The vice of the control of the in the Justice Department be-ginning as an FBI clerk, Peter-dled the Watergate investigasen said he was ready for tion. something new.

President; and you could not announced.

not tell the President unless you had good resaons. I did not have good reasons.

"I'm afraid that if I had it to do over again," Petersen con-cluded, "I'd probably do the same thing."

Petersen said he had no criticism of any of the Attorney General he worked for, in-cluding John N. Mitchell, now one of the Watergate cover-up defendants. "I've never met an Attorney General I didn't like," he quipped Petersen also declined to criticize Mr. Ford's pardon of former President Nixon, terming it "a gutty decision."

Petersen said he has no immediate plans other than to "go home, sit down, and weigh the offers to practice law." His retirement; transmitted to President Ford last Friday, takes effect Dec. 31. Petersen said one factor in his decision was money. He said under the federal retirement system, an official with his years of government service takes home about "\$100 a month" more by continuing to work than in retirement.
In a letter released by the

White House yesterday Mr. Ford said he accepted Petersen's resignation with "deep regret and even deeper appreciation of your contributions to government." The President called Petersen's record

one of "unique achievement." Petersen said he would would make recommendations for a successor but would not elaborate. The position of assistant something new.

"There were only two choices," Petersen said. "Tell ple of years have taken their toll," he said.

"There were only two choices," Petersen said. "Tell the president or not tell the president; and you could not appoint the president or not tell the president; and you could not appoint the president or not tell the president.