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W Post

Day of the Firestorm

A Dizzying Procession of Events—and Agony

By Laurence Stern
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It was a day that will forever be etched in the national memory, a drama that embraced the full range of American political institutions and public passions.

The chief actor — the President — remained hidden from public view through the dizzying procession of events and left Washington finally for the seclusion of his Camp David retreat on a Maryland mountaintop.

His chief of staff, Alexander M. Haig Jr., described it as a period of "firestorm" and spoke of the presidential agony and soul-searching in the face of a prospective collision with the judiciary and Congress.

As Haig spoke to a crowded room of reporters in the White House basement, bursts of horn-honking echoed across the grounds from Pennsylvania Avenue in response to a handful of demonstrators who held placards saying "Honk for Impeachment." That sound could not have failed to reach the Oval Office as well.

Elliot L. Richardson, a prime casualty of the firestorm, referred to the "unfolding drama" of the confrontation of the tapes which came to its climax Saturday night and has been reverberating through the country and its seat of government ever since.

All the participants, according to their own styles, tried to give voice to the extraordinary nature of these past few days when the American system strained and rumbled in the grips of impending constitutional crisis.

Western Union was the thermometer of public reaction to the firing Saturday night. Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and the departure of the Nixon administration's two most prominent symbols of official rectitude—Richardson and his deputy, William D. Ruckelshaus.

More than 160,000 telegrams poured into Washing-

ton by dusk yesterday, swamping Western Union's circuits with what appeared to be an overwhelming mandate of disapproval for the President's action.

Henry A. Kissinger jetted back from the transitory triumph of the declaratory cease-fire in the Middle East only to find Washington's attention once again riveted on the obsession of Watergate. He called off a press conference at which the diplomatic breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli War might have been a proper subject of celebration on any other day.

On Capitol Hill there was gathering momentum for impeachment as the avalanche of wires, letters and phone calls kept flooding in — even after the word passed that the President had agreed to submit the contested Watergate tapes to U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica.

The day's public applause went to the casualties of the confrontation — Richardson, Ruckelshaus and Cox—each of whom paid their farewell homage in the service of the Nixon administration. They spoke in tones of restraint and respectfulness for the President whose order they could not conscientiously follow. The bitterness remained private.

Richardson, for more than four years Mr. Nixon's pre-eminent Boston Brahmin, was the first to appear publicly and give his version of why it was no longer tolerable of him to serve his President.

Before he could speak he was greeted with a burst of sustained applause that rang out through the Great Hall of the Department of Justice for several minutes.

His signal words were: "Although I strongly believe in the general purposes and priorities of his (President Nixon's) administration, I have been compelled to conclude that I could better serve my country by resigning from public office than by continuing in it."

Had he been Cox, Richardson acknowledged to a questioner, he would have done exactly as Cox had

done in refusing the President's terms of settlement.

Earlier, in the White House, the staff of domestic counsellor Melvin R. Laird carried on in normal, upbeat manner, seemingly unperturbed by the events of the weekend "firestorm." Laird was congratulated for his Sunday performance on "Meet the Press," and he in turn praised the President for lonely courage and spoke of the need to rally behind the chief executive, according to one of the participants.

Cox took his turn on the stage at a noon meeting with his staff at the former headquarters of his special Watergate prosecution staff, which had been garrisoned off by FBI agents and federal marshals.

Leaning against a post in the anteroom, the fired special prosecutor said with moving, though rambling syntax:

"I do think it important that the work go on being done and that the integrity . . . the unity, viability, existence, whatever the right words are, of the organization will be preserved during that period and that the work go forward during that period as we all tried to do," Cox said.

The young lawyers who made up his staff listened grimly. There were a few tears. Outside the building at 1425 K St. NW there was a picket line of demonstrators calling for the President's impeachment.

"I will say just one thing more," Cox continued. "A professor can always say one thing more once he gets hold of himself. As far as I am concerned, I am going to stay in the city. I think I may be called to testify once or twice . . ."

Ruckelshaus chose the National Press Club, where Cox had spoken Saturday, to say his final piece. It was necessary, he said, to reinstitute the special independent investigation of Watergate and its ramifications in what he saw as a national crisis of confidence in the government.



Photos by James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post
Vice President-designate Ford leaves session of House GOP leaders he still heads.



United Press International

Robert Barker, left, Edward O'Connell Mitchell and Maurice Stans, leave N.Y. court after trial opening was delayed.