

ROWLAND EVANS AND ROBERT NOVAK

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Nixon will replace Kleindienst, soften Justice Department image

WASHINGTON — As a first order of business in his second administration, President Nixon will replace Richard Kleindienst as attorney general — a move with profound symbolic overtones.

The fact that former Atty. Gen. John Mitchell is now privately counselling Mr. Nixon to put a non-political lawyer of unimpeachable integrity in charge at the Justice Department is highly significant. It was Mitchell as Mr. Nixon's top adviser—tough, inflexible, arbitrary on civil liberties and Supreme Court appointments — who set the tone and style of the first Nixon Administration. Now he wants a change.

Mitchell's confidential advice to the President makes good political sense. Nowhere is an administration's style and tone established more clearly than at Justice, with its vast powers over law and order, business, labor and race relations and in setting the moral climate of any administration.

Moreover, ominous shadows from the Watergate and attendant espionage scandals have shrouded the administration since last June. The Watergate trial and congressional investigations will make headlines for months as Mr. Nixon sets about organizing his second term.

To erase the Watergate taint, some highly placed Republicans outside the administration are privately advising every White House and Nixon campaign official implicated in the scandal — the innocent along with the guilty — must be dismissed. Mr. Nixon is not willing to go along with such radical house-cleaning. But some new faces at Justice might be another matter.

As Mitchell views it, an unimpeachable attorney general is essential to remove any political taint from the administration's conduct during the Watergate trial and the Capitol Hill probes. That eliminates the highly political and highly controversial Kleindienst, sworn in as attorney general June 12 after a bitter battle for Senate confirmation.

When The Washington Post reported

Oct. 20 that Kleindienst might be eased out as attorney general, he privately laughed it off to fellow administration officials and advised he would be around for another year. Since then, however, he has been fighting to stay another six months. The decision, subject to change, is for Kleindienst to leave as soon as possible — preferably by the first of the year, certainly by the end of February.

Less certain is his successor. Mitchell's formula would eliminate two prime contenders: Clark MacGregor, who succeeded Mitchell as Mr. Nixon's national campaign manager soon after the Watergate bugging, and White House domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman, who wants the job.

MacGregor denies he has made any decision, but intimates reveal he has virtually decided on a lucrative job in private industry. Although they are close personal friends, Mitchell believes MacGregor's campaign role — even though it followed Watergate — would make him a political liability at Justice. Ehrlichman is still a contender. But if Mitchell's advice is followed he will be given some lesser cabinet post.



Atty. Gen. Kleindienst

A symbolic move