

(See NYTimes 12 Jan 73, filed POWs, for longer version of this column.)

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NEW YORK — The new Nixon cabinet is up before the Senate these days for confirmation, and more often than not, it is a painful sight. For the new boys, reaching for the most prestigious jobs of their lives, face the most searching questions about what they really believe, and somehow they have to try to be faithful to themselves and to the President who has nominated him, and to his policies, which they may or may not approve.

Elliot L. Richardson of Massachusetts, former secretary of HEW, former law clerk to Learned Hand and Felix Frankfurter, and now Nixon's appointee as secretary of Defense, illustrates the problem. The senators surveyed him with skeptical courtesy.

Power and pity

What did he think of the Christmas bombing of Hanoi? In that room were senators on the bench and students and colleagues from Harvard who knew him back in the days when he could and did say what he thought privately about power and pity, but now he had a decision to make between his political ambition, his private philosophy, and his responsibility to the President who had nominated him.

At first he stammered; until Senator Hughes of Iowa inquired whether he was going to answer the hard questions straight, and he said maybe he wasn't, and later decided to support the bombing, risking the fire of the Congress rather than the ire of the White House.

He will be confirmed by the Senate — no doubt about that in the long run. He

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is an intelligent and experienced public servant, and the senators know from their own experience, that life is a very complicated process between private conviction and public policy. But the problem still remains.

At what point do private conviction and public policy break? Under Secretary of State George Ball disagreed with Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policy as much as Anthony Eden disagreed with Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy in Britain before the last world war, but Eden resigned on principle, and Ball stayed on in the belief that he could be more faithful to his principles arguing with the President inside the government than scalding him in the newspapers and magazines outside the government.

Henry Kissinger has an even tougher problem than either Ball or Richardson. Like them, he has been around for a long time. He is an historian and a teacher. His views on power, diplomacy, and politics are well known to his large company of friends in the press and in the university and political communities, and it would be hard to convince any of them who have known him over the last two decades that he approves the recent bombing of North Vietnam.

Yet he stays on in Paris and tries to do the best he can, and is villified in the process by many of his best friends for doing so. Would it be better if he got out and slammed the door? And left the President to deal with the consequences of his resignation, which would reassure Hanoi? And turned the President over to the advice of John Connally, John Mitchell, and William Rogers in the last critical phase of the Vietnam negotiations?

One remembers the day in the House of Commons when Eden broke with Chamberlain, and Duff Cooper resigned on the same fundamental principle that he couldn't serve a policy he opposed. And yet one wonders whether Kissinger and Richardson are in the same situa-

Might be worse

It might be even worse if Kissinger resigned on the bombing, and Richardson said he was against the bombing but wanted to be secretary of Defense anyway. The bet here is that the public would support the President, and that Kissinger and Richardson would be replaced by men who would make a cease-fire in Vietnam even more difficult than it is now.

Even so, we are left with a highly unsatisfactory situation. The Senate has a constitutional responsibility to confirm the President's nominee for secretary of Defense. It wants to know what Elliot Richardson thinks, for it will probably have to deal with him for four long years. But Richardson at first hesitates, and then supports the President, and leaves the Senate to confirm him, as it will, but with serious doubts.

Not a new problem

This is not a new problem. Always men at the top of powerful institutions have had to deal with the conflict between what they believe to be "right" and what they believe to be best for the institution. And in the end, and increasingly over the last generation, they have swallowed their own beliefs and gone along with the institution.

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