

Cabinet Confirmation Hearings

SFChronicle

Nominees Refuse to State Views

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Washington

President Nixon's first two new cabinet nominees to face Senate confirmation proceedings refused to commit themselves on key administration policies yesterday.

Elliot L. Richardson, the President's choice to be the next secretary of defense, declined to tell the Senate Armed Services Committee his personal views on the U.S. bombing campaign over North Vietnam last month.

Claude S. Brinegar, a California oil company executive chosen to be secretary of transportation in the second Nixon administration, refused to commit himself before the Senate Commerce Committee on whether he believes that urban areas should be allowed to use federal highway money to build mass transit systems.

There was no indication that either cabinet nominee would have difficulty winning approval of the two committees, the first step in the confirmation process. But their reluctance to go on record on major policy issues came amid complaints from many in Congress that senators and representatives are being denied vital information by the administration, particularly on the

Vietnam peace negotiations and the massive bombing campaign in December.

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Both Richardson, the incumbent secretary of health, education and welfare, and Brinegar told the respective committees that they are not familiar enough with policies of their prospective departments to discuss details of the issues.

Richardson also made it clear that he does not intend to discuss the situation in Southeast Asia in any way that might jeopardize the private peace talks in Paris.

Senator Harold E. Hughes (Dem - Iowa) told Richardson at one point that he is concerned about the possibility that Congress and the public would remain in the dark if the talks should break off, as they did on December 13, and the President should resume massive bombing, as he did December 18.

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If the current peace negotiations should fail to obtain a Vietnam settlement, said Hughes, "I want to know what the next step is going to be. I want to know if the ratchet is going to be turned one step tighter."

Similarly, Senator William B. Saxbe (Rep - Ohio) told Richardson that he regards it as important to know something "about how you do feel" on the bombing tactics because of the defense secretary's potential role in policy making.

At the outset of the hearing, Richardson told the committee chairman, Senator John C. Stennis (Dem - Miss.) that he regards "candor and forthrightness" as "indispensable" ingredients of testimony by administration officials before the committee.

Richardson told the committee that he would "certainly want to review" congressional reports on the dismissal of Air Force General John D. Lavelle.

Brinegar, meantime, told

the commerce committee that he has not had an opportunity to study details of the controversy over use of highway funds for mass transit systems. He also declined to give his views on legislation involving such issues as air hijackings, oil pollution control and auto safety, citing the same reason.