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Nixon's New Cabinet

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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, to the President who has nominated them and to his policies, which they may or may not approve.

Elliot L. Richardson of Massachusetts, former Secretary of H.E.W., former law clerk to Learned Hand and Felix Frankfurter, and now Mr. Nixon's appointee as Secretary of Defense, illustrates the problem. The Senators surveyed him with skeptical courtesy.

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 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 scolding 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 teacher. His views of 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 vilified 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 Bill Rogers in the last critical phase of the Vietnam negotiations?

It might be even worse if Mr. Kissinger resigned on the bombing and Mr. 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.

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.

Robert McNamara and later Clark Clifford went along for a while and then broke with the President on Vietnam—not openly but gradually;

but their opposition was not really effective in changing the policy—it was too subtle and too late.

The chances are that Mr. Kissinger eventually will break with Nixon, whether he finally manages to negotiate a compromise, or he doesn't. But meanwhile, he knows more about the intricate issues in the cease-fire negotiations and more about the personality and psychology of Le Duc Tho than anybody else, so he is staying on during the last phase of the talks and carrying out the President's instructions, and he is probably right.

For breaking now would probably be worse. The chances for a compromise, for reconciling the basic interests of North and South Vietnam, of the United States, China and the Soviet Union, are probably better now than they are likely to be in the coming year or so in Southeast Asia.

So Mr. Kissinger is staying and negotiating, and since he has managed to create some sense of trust with Le Duc Tho, the chances are that he has a better chance of arranging a cease-fire than anybody else.