

New Counsel Had Obscure Role at Top

By Lawrence Meyer
Washington Post Staff Writer

It is perhaps a mark of the relative obscurity of Leonard Garment—the White House aide named by President Nixon yesterday to temporarily replace White House counsel John W. Dean III—that his name does not even appear in the current Who's Who in America.

Garment—variously described as the “house liberal” in the Nixon administration, the President's contact to the black, Jewish and other minority communities, a “nice guy,” the philosopher in the White House, a contemplative man—is also something of a Cinderella in the corridors of Washington power.

The 48-year-old Garment was one of the few advisers to whom the President turned for advice on handling the Watergate affair in recent days. He also had been one of a tiny handful of men with whom Richard Nixon spoke during his political exile in the mid-1960s, even though Garment openly supported John F. Kennedy in 1960. Garment was then head of the litigation section of the law firm of Nixon, Mudge, Rose, Guthrie and Alexander.

“They became friends,” Theodore White wrote in “The Making of the President 1968.” “Nixon would go to Garment's home in Brooklyn and as Garment played the clarinet, Nixon would thump on the piano.”

On the one hand, they seemed so different—Nixon, the Quaker from Southern California who seemed somehow uncomfortable in the big cities of the East, and Garment, a Brooklyn Jew who found the cultural and intellectual life of New York exhilarating.

On the other hand, they had much in common. Both came from relatively poor families. Mr. Nixon worked his way through Whittier College and Duke University Law School. Garment played his clarinet in jazz bands, including Woody Herman's, to pay his way through Brooklyn College and Brooklyn Law School. Both were lawyers with an appreciation for the precision of the law. According to a wide variety of sources, they established a close rapport, a meeting of minds despite their differences in background and often in outlook.

When Nixon the lawyer decided to again become Nixon the candidate in 1968, Garment worked on the campaign, traveling with Nixon as he kicked off his 1968 campaign in New Hampshire. Garment worked on the media campaign for the 1968 race, selling the “new” Nixon to the American public in so successful a way that it became the subject of a best-selling book, “The Selling of the President.”

After the campaign, Garment worked on transition problems as part of the task force that plotted the future course of the Nixon administration from the Pierre Hotel in New York.

Garment, according to one Republican who met him in early 1968 and has become friendly, “wanted very much to go into the government and there were people who didn't want him there.” Among those “people,” according to this source were H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John R. Ehrlichman.

Another source, a former White House aide, said, “I think he expected to come down here in an honored position.” Instead, this source said, “there was some

sleight of hand" and he was put into the Washington office of the old Nixon law firm.

The early days of the Nixon administration were a "period of great pain for Leonard," said one source who asked not to be named. Garment found himself on the outside looking in, wanted to be part of the action and finally asked the President for a job inside the White House.

Garment was named special consultant to the President, a title that in no way describes the variety of jobs he has undertaken. In broad form, Garment's role in the White House has been to handle minority and civil rights problems and to be a good shepherd for the performing arts. More recently, Mr. Nixon has sought Garment's help in dealing with the President's own investigation of the Watergate affair.

In announcing yesterday that Garment "will represent the White House in all matters relating to the Watergate investigation and will report directly to me," the President made official what has been a reality during the turmoil of the past two weeks. The President has been consulting regularly with Garment on the Watergate affair. And Garment, one of the White House aides whose name was never mentioned in connection with the scandal, has been advocating the sort of general housecleaning that Mr. Nixon undertook yesterday, according to reliable sources.

One Washington lawyer summed up two opposing views of Garment's role in the White House. "Some people really felt he was there for window dressing, to have a Jew in the White House, a liberal Jew in the White House, someone who appealed to the liberal Jewish community. Others felt that he was a nice guy, a very capable guy whom the President respected. I always thought he was effective," the lawyer said.

As for Garment's relations with Haldeman and Ehrlichman, the lawyer said, "I think he was always one of



Associated Press

Leonard Garment called "house liberal," "nice guy."

those people that those guys tolerated."

Garment, according to the former White House aide, had "relative freedom" in dealing with civil rights problems and the arts. Friction with Haldeman and Ehrlichman was minimal, this source said, not because the three men agreed, but because "by and large he (Garment) has engaged himself in things he thought were important and they didn't and because he had a continuing special relationship to the President."

But if Garment, who once was on the executive board of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, had a liberal intent, he was not always as effective as civil rights groups wanted him to be. One white civil rights leader put it this way, "What his role really has been is to defuse the liberal community, a place to go without really being effective. Len Garment was there to take care of them. He lost a fantastic amount of credibility, frankly. On the other hand, he was very useful. We got lots of results out of him. He's had a kind of mixed life."

Bookish, a man who likes to "play with ideas," according to a friend, Garment was described as "too mundane, too sensitive, too aware of the frailties of man, too aware of the human situation" to be popular with Haldeman and Ehrlichman. The person who gave this description, for-

mer Nixon campaign official and New York lawyer Rita Hauser, said she was "delighted" that the President had appointed Garment counsel.

"Leonard stood for decency and humanity in the White House, two qualities that were often not present enough," Mrs. Hauser said. Expressing herself as part of a "small crowd who supported Nixon and still support Nixon but who were very disillusioned," Mrs. Hauser said, "Maybe this will open the door. A breath of fresh air."