

Richardson's New Post

It's His Hour of

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Washington

For Elliot Lee Richardson, the time has now arrived when he can prove whether he is the man he thinks he is or the mouse that much of Washington takes him to be.

Of all those whose standing and prospects have been altered by the Watergate calamity, the new attorney general finds himself uniquely in a make-or-break position.

He can either play a subservient role in a sinking administration—which is what most people expect — or he can break free and assert his independence in a way that

could not only restore the reputation he brought to town but conceivably make him the center of the political regeneration of a Republican Party now desperately short of leadership.

Which he does depends almost entirely on how much backbone this brilliantly trained Boston Brahmin really has.

Richardson came to Washington four years ago from his elective post as attorney general of Massachusetts with a formidable reputation for integrity and competence — and a strong ambition to rise in national politics.

JOB

He performed commendably in his first job as under-secretary of state and then was summoned by President Nixon to rescue the Depart-



ELLIOT RICHARDSON
A make-or-break position

ment of Health, Education and Welfare from the chaos that had developed under Robert H. Finch. As the New York Times's Christopher Lydon, a longtime Richardson watcher from Boston, recently wrote, the secretary "is remembered at HEW as a stubborn infighter and consistent loser." In showdowns with John Mitchell, John Ehrlichman and other departed powers, it was Richardson who blinked.

Last January, Mr. Nixon snatched Richardson out of HEW to plug the vacancy caused by Melvin Laird's resignation as secretary of defense. He left him there just long enough to take responsibility for shutting down the Boston Navy Yard,

and then, in effect, directed a reluctant Richardson to switch again and replace Richard G. Kleindienst as attorney general in the midst of the Watergate scandal.

In responding to his leader's frequent change of signals, Richardson has been in part simply a loyal "team player" in an administration whose larger purposes, domestic and foreign, he genuinely supports.

FACT

But it is also a fact that from the time he left his home base in Massachusetts, Richardson's future has been largely in Mr. Nixon's hands. Politically, he cannot go home again. The governorship is held by his cousin, Francis Sargent, and the senate seats by unbeatable Ed Brooke and Ted Kennedy.

Since 1969, Richardson has been in the position where he did what Mr. Nixon wanted, or gave up his political career.

Analysis
and
Opinion

Thus, it should not have been as much of a shock to him as it apparently was that the judiciary committee members who had to pass on his qualifications to be attorney general thought him too much Mr. Nixon's man to be trusted with the Watergate investigation.

The senators had seen this pillar of integrity, this disciple of Learned Hand and Felix Frankfurter, this perfect product of generations of scholarship and rectitude, caricatured in his hometown paper, the Boston Globe, as Mr. Nixon's windup doll.

PRICE

They insisted that the price for his confirmation would be his acceptance of a totally independent Watergate prosecutor — his old Harvard professor, Archibald Cox.

What all this has done to Richardson's self-image is a secret locked behind that cool, formal exterior, but it takes no genius to figure out that he cannot have enjoyed the experience.

But the irony is that his humiliation can also be his liberation. There is no way now that Richardson can spare his President from the most pitiless investigation—even were he so inclined. In-

Decision

deed, his whole relationship to the President is now reversed.

Bluntly, the lame-duck embattled Mr. Nixon no longer can do much to or for Richardson's future career. Should the President lean on him in any way, all Richardson has to say is, "Sir, if that is an order, I am afraid I would have no choice but to resign." The President cannot stand up to a resignation threat from this attorney general.

But the ability to resist any interference by the President or his aides is only the beginning of Richardson's new freedom. Washington is so accustomed to thinking of the attorney general as the President's agent that it is easy to forget the power of that office when wielded by an independent man.

AUTHORITY

The justice department has statutory authority and wide discretion in every major area of domestic concern, from price-fixing to taxes to drugs to the environment to civil rights and every variety of law enforcement.

Because there is such a vacuum of leadership in the administration — with key jobs vacant and the bureaucracy adrift in many of the agencies with specialized responsibilities in these areas — Richardson has the opportunity to make the justice department the action agency of the federal government.

His first challenge is to reverse the last four years' decline by recruiting the kind of staff that will restore prestige to Justice Department employment. He did that job extraordinarily well as attorney general of Massachusetts, and if he succeeds here, he can quite literally make his department the focus of domestic policy in the next three years.

He can also, looking down the road, earn for himself the kind of reputation in Washington and the nation which he once enjoyed in Massachusetts. He can even compel his own party to ask in 1976: "Why not go with our best?"

All that is possible. But its achievement depends entirely on what Richardson's character really is.