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Richardson Voices Solid

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Attorney General Elliot L.

Richardson yesterday voiced solid confidence in Henry E. Petersen, the assistant attorney general who supervised the Government's initial investigations of the Watergate scandal.

Nothing has emerged in the way of evidence or facts to cast any doubts on the honesty or integrity of Mr.

Petersen," Richardson said in a statement issued late yesterday morning.

The support came in response to a report in the New York Times that special prosecutor Archibald Cox and his aides had decided to investigate Petersen's conduct to determine whether he had any part in the Watergate cover-up.

In a separate statement, Cox said only that his special prosecuting staff "is in-

vestigating the activities of, and information available from, every person associated with the Watergate case."

But the newly installed Watergate prosecutor declined to comment on the Petersen report. "Our rule—necessary in order to protect the investigation—will be neither to affirm nor deny newspaper speculation concerning individuals," Cox announced.

Cox is known to consider a thorough review of the Justice Department's handling of the Watergate case—in effect, an investigation of the investigation—a part of his assignment.

Several Justice Department officials suggested yesterday that this would necessarily include scrutiny of Petersen's work, as well as that of the local Watergate prosecuting team headed by

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Confidence in Petersen

assistant U.S. Attorney Earl J. Silbert.

The head of the Justice Department's criminal division, Petersen supervised last year's Watergate investigation. He was put in complete charge by President Nixon in April when then Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst disqualified himself, but congressional pressures for an independent prosecutor then led to

Petersen's replacement by Cox.

Richardson has met with Cox several times about the progress of the special prosecutor's work since they were both sworn in May 26, a Justice Department spokesman said, but it was not known whether the Attorney General's endorsement of Petersen stemmed from any of those talks.

Richardson said, however,

that he had a high regard for Petersen before taking over at the Justice Department and that his respect for him has not diminished since then.

Kleindienst, meanwhile, denounced suggestions that Petersen might have been involved in the Watergate cover-up and praised him as "one of the finest, most conscientious, dedicated career lawyers the Department has ever had."

"Nobody ever told him what to do and he wouldn't have done it even if they had," Kleindienst declared in a brief telephone interview. "He would have quit."

Asked whether his own role as Attorney General might also be probed, Kleindienst said he didn't know and didn't care.

"Let them scrutinize it," he said. "If anybody says I did (something wrong), they are lying."