

Caught in Watergate Web

By Harry Kelly

Examiner Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen — tough, wry, "So honest," says a colleague, "that you could roll dice with him over the telephone and he might lose" — has been caught in the middle of the Watergate scandal and squeezed bitter.

He feels he was used and betrayed and is "angry as hell at the Administration" but is afraid to retire lest he be scarred with the Watergate brand.

"My conscience is clear," he told a friend the other day.

On Petersen's lean shoulders rests much of the Justice Department's reputation as special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox investigates whether the department sought to conceal the involvement of White House officials and former Attorney General John Mitchell.

On His Own

But Petersen acknowledges that it was his decision — unprompted by anyone else — that limited the original Watergate investigation to the break-in and bugging at the Democratic headquarters and the prosecution of seven underlings. He received no instructions from the President, he has told friends.

"He said the investigation should be limited to the specific criminal acts and not get into the political arena," said a Justice Department source. "I think Henry was

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badly misled."

The 52 year old Petersen devoted a quarter of a century to catching big crooks and breaking up organized crime.

Hard to Believe

But when the trial in his biggest case led to the iron gate of the White House he couldn't believe it, according to associates.

"It was inconceivable to Henry," said a Justice Department source, "that anyone would leave the White House exposed in a matter like this. The White House is always protected. Somebody else, maybe officials of CREEP (the Committee to Re-Elect the President), were involved."

For 25 years Petersen had a bureaucrat's awe for the office of the presidency, whether occupied by Harry

S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson or Richard M. Nixon.

Rationalization

A few weeks ago, while pacing his suite in the Justice Department, where he began his career as an FBI clerk, Petersen enunciated a bureaucratic rationalization for even acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray's subservience to the White House:

"If the President of the United States calls me on the telephone and asks me to do something, I say, 'Yes sir,' and do it." He paused. "If I'd ever told President Kennedy 'No,' Bobby Kennedy (his brother's Attorney General) would have dropped me out the window onto Pennsylvania Avenue."

Coming from Petersen, it was the expression of a

Washington fact of life from a widely respected civil servant, not the cringing of a government hack who owes his job to political loyalty.

In his years in the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section Petersen earned a reputation for being tough, cautious and "almost impossible to con."

While he rose to the top civil service post in the Justice Department — chief of the Organized Crime Section — it was John Mitchell who promoted him to levels usually reserved for political rewards.

Petersen called Mitchell "a man of high integrity and a tough prosecutor — he's such a refreshing breath of air after Ramsey Clark" — the Attorney General in the Johnson Administration whom Nixon had called permissive.

A critic within the FBI contends that Petersen, like L. Patrick Gray, was so ambitious to be named FBI director that "he sold out. He limited the investigation. He made us all look bad."

But an admirer contends such flak from the FBI is the work of a clique that sought to shoot down Petersen and other FBI outsiders as possible J. Edgar Hoover successors, and was responsible for news leaks embarrassing to the ex-Marine.

Petersen, a proud man with seven children, feels bitter that a 25-year record of government service has been tarnished.