

Self-Styled '90-Day Wonder' Finally Drew the Line

Elliot Lee Richardson calls himself a "90-day wonder."

Three months as Secretary of Defense. And now a tenure seven days short of five months as Attorney General.

But this time he wasn't being sent to shore up yet another troubled department in the Nixon administration. Saturday night Elliot L. Richardson quit. The Cabinet. The administration. His employment

in the U.S. government. Lest anyone still question the precise location of his spinal column.

That suggestion — that critics in the past have accused Richardson of subordinating principle to hold onto office — irked him to comment during an interview hardly more than a month ago: "I have drawn a line in my own mind, beyond which I will not go; and I work hard to avoid being forced over the line."

Taking over a department more than four months ago whose previous occupant, Richard G. Kleindienst, had to quit under fire and whose next previous occupant, John N. Mitchell, was under criminal indictment, Richardson saw his task as one of "purifying" the department and further, he said, "99 and

44-100 per cent pure is not now — if it ever was — good enough."

He would not, he said, sacrifice principle to hold office.

This weekend, Richardson, tall and trim at 53, square-jawed and a man on the spot if there ever was one, was forced to the line. He refused to cross.

On Friday, President Richard M. Nixon ordered Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox to cease his court battle to obtain tape recordings of the President's Watergate conversations with White House aides. Cox, declaring the tapes vital evidence in the scandal, refused.

On Saturday, Cox, who taught Richardson law at Harvard, said duty to the American people required him to pursue the tapes in court. It was this duty to the American people that Richardson cited again Saturday night when he told Mr. Nixon: "I have no choice but to resign."

"While I fully respect the reasons that have led you to conclude that the special pros-

ecutor must be discharged," Richardson wrote the President, "I trust that you understand that I could not, in the light of these firm and repeated commitments (to Cox's independence) carry out your direction that this be done . . ."

A Boston Brahmin, Richardson was born into a line of early New England settlers, whose descendants made their fortunes and reputations in medicine, law, banking and public service. Richardson volunteered during World War II for combat duty as a private, won a commission and was wounded and decorated on the beaches of Normandy.

He was graduated from Harvard cum laude and was editor and president of the Harvard Law Review.

He has been U.S. attorney, lieutenant governor and attorney general of Massachusetts; in New York, clerk to Judge Learned Hand of the U.S. Court of Appeals; in Washington, clerk to Justice Felix Frankfurter of the Supreme Court, assistant secretary for legislation in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and under secretary of state.

In 1970, he inherited a huge, complex and troubled Department of Health, Education and Welfare, succeeding Robert H. Finch as secretary. A man with a quick grasp of complex detail, a penetrating analyst and problem solver, he made HEW work and controlled its bickering baronies.

This January, Richardson took over the Pentagon as Secretary of Defense and saw America's military machinery through three months of post-Vietnam cease-fire problems. It was after he left to take over the Justice Department following the resignation of the Watergate-beleaguered Mitchell that he began calling himself a "90-day wonder."

Once before, Elliot Richardson wrote a letter of resignation to the President of the United States. It was addressed to Dwight D. Eisenhower under whom Richardson served as assistant secretary of HEW.

Richardson had developed a

program for substantial federal aid to education. Strong administration forces were lined up against it. Determined to quit if he lost, Richardson discovered an ally at the crucial Cabinet meeting who slowly and skillfully turned the meeting around and finally won Eisenhower's approval.

The ally?

Richard M. Nixon.