

President's view of Cox

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

WASHINGTON — Last weekend's stunning Watergate developments actually originated in President Nixon's deep regret, encouraged by aides who share his hard-line political style, that he had agreed to Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox's selection under duress last spring.

Those aides considered Cox a liberal Kennedy Democrat with a dagger at Mr. Nixon's throat. Even presidential counselor Melvin R. Laird, a voice of moderation at the White House, regarded Cox's appointment as incredibly bad politics.

This revulsion with Cox began boiling over about 10 days ago when Mr. Nixon instructed Atty. Gen. Elliot Richardson to offer a compromise on the White House tape recordings that Cox could never accept. In the upper reaches of the Justice Department, this was immediately recognized as a ploy to conclude the tapes question while purging Cox and his whole operation. That it also would drive such independent voices as Richardson and Deputy Atty. Gen. William Ruckelshaus out of government was viewed as an added bonus by White House hard-liners.

High-ranking Justice Department officials believe that the special prosecutor's office, though run by Kennedy Democrats, was in no way embarked on a vendetta against the President. Rather, one high-ranking Justice Department official suspects the White House feared "Cox was doing too good a job." Indeed, some lawyers in Cox's office had hinted they were close to startling breakthroughs.

Cox's departure provides grim satisfaction in itself at the White House. "That arrogant S.O.B. Cox had this whole little Kennedy fiefdom, and now he doesn't have it anymore," one presidential aide told us.

Mr. Nixon clearly expected Cox's dismissal would be followed by resignations of his top staff. Instead, White House aides were stunned when Cox's press spokesman announced the Cox operation was staying intact.

That intensifies pressure on Asst. Atty. Gen. Henry Petersen, now in charge of the case, in resuming prosecution of Watergate. Inheriting Cox's army, he faces instant public protests if he changes direction. In fact, Justice Department colleagues feel Petersen may be even tougher than Cox.

Moreover, the White House strategy of aligning Congress against Cox has failed. There is bipartisan feeling in the Senate that the summary dismissal of Cox insulted a Senate which had forced creation of the special prosecutor's office. Consequently, the Senate must legislate a new special prosecutor to retain any self-respect.

Republican congressmen returning from the long weekend gave glum reports to presidential aides checking public reaction.

The belated surrender of the tapes does not end the crisis. Republicans are bitter about Richardson and Ruckelshaus and a broad bipartisan segment of Congress remains insistent that a new independent mechanism to prosecute Watergate be established. After having put the country through the hoops over five incredible days, Mr. Nixon has not put Watergate behind him.