

A 'Tough' Prosecutor

Richard Ben-Veniste

By LINDA CHARLTON

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Richard Ben-Veniste, one of the Watergate special prosecution force's most aggressive young lawyers, walks softly and confidently in the Federal courtroom where he has been questioning witnesses, but insists that "I really don't take myself too seriously." He

Man in the News concedes that he is self-confident, as indeed he appears: "If you make it in New

York," the 30-year-old assistant special prosecutor said, "you have some confidence in yourself." And for a young trial lawyer, Mr. Ben-Veniste could be said to have "made it" in New York by the time he left the office of the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York to join the Watergate task force in July. Mr. Ben-Veniste had prosecuted several celebrated cases, including that of Martin Sweig, the veteran administrative assistant to John W. McCormack of Massachusetts, former Democratic Speaker of the House, and had a reputation as a "tough prosecutor."

Part of Master's Program

Mr. Ben-Veniste went into the United States Attorney's office straight from law school, which does not happen very often. He started there as part of his master's program at the Northwestern University School of Law, where he got his master of laws degree in 1968. Then he stayed on, assigned first to the Special Prosecutions Section and then as chief of the Official Corruption Section, from June, 1972, until joining the Watergate task force last summer.

While he was involved in several notable cases in other areas—organized crime and labor racketeering—it was, and is, official corruption that really fascinates him as a lawyer. Partly, he said in a recent telephone interview, because it is challenging; it is "white collar" crime and a prosecutor generally faces "the best defense lawyers." But partly, he said, "because of the hypocrisy involved" in official corruption.

"The current focus on corruption is having an impact," he said. "First, the public does have a say, and if they express it, it does have an effect." Secondly, he feels that it demonstrates the strength of a democratic system of government: "This country is one of only a handful that could sustain Watergate and the open investigation."



Associated Press

Self-confident and tough

Enjoys His Work

Aside from the content of cases, Mr. Ben-Veniste likes his work. He enjoys being a trial lawyer: "Appearing in court, meeting strangers, trying to convince them of your point of view, seeing people on the jury and relating to them," as well as the "rare opportunity" to see people—witnesses as well as defendants—at what may be for many the most dramatic moment in their lives, "letting their defenses down."

But all the same, he said, he will have "probably a few careers in my life." Pressed for specifics, he said vaguely he "might do a little writing."

For the moment, Richard Ben-Veniste—he is adamant in his refusal to disclose his middle name and is called "Rick" by his friends—is evidently enjoying life as it is. A native New Yorker, born there Jan. 3, 1943, he now lives in a Georgetown apartment and rides his 10-speed bike downtown to the prosecution force's offices on K Street in downtown Washington.

He describes his family background as "a great New York mixture". His father, a businessman in textiles, came from a Sephardic family with its roots in northern Spain and Greece, and his mother's background is German and Russian.

His hyphenated name has given rise to some "fairly bizarre" mailing-list misspellings, he said, and to some amusing incidents. One that he recalled concerned a witness—whose name was something usual such as "Joe Smith"—who asked him in court "if he could call me Mr. Ben for short." Mr. Ben-Veniste, who likes his unusual name, replied that he had no objection—so long as he could call the witness, "Mr. Joe."

To Mr. Ben-Veniste, Washington is pleasant—"kind of country, and you don't have to wait on huge lines"—but "there's nothing like New York." He was graduated from Stuyvesant High School there in 1960, got his bachelor's degree magna cum laude from Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., in 1964, and returned to New York to get his law degree from Columbia University, where he was the Harlan Fisk Stone Scholar, in 1967.

A bachelor, Mr. Ben-Veniste is 5 feet, 7 inches tall, with a wide smile and curly black hair; he has a

taste for cigars and stylishly conservative clothing. He likes "mystery movies" and has a favorite book—"The Magic Christian," by Terry Southern—that he said he rereads once a year. He has as active a social life as the job allows. When he can, he said he likes to "get out of town and tramp around the woods."

"He's a digger," said one man who knew him slightly at the United States Attorney's office. "He had some good wins," another said. "He's very, very fair but also very determined, very enthusiastic, very interested in corruption."

"I really don't take myself too seriously," said the young man who has also been described as a "tough" and "hard-eyed" prosecutor. "I just kind of enjoy current experiences and not worry about it." And there is no doubt that one of the "current experiences" is his career as a prosecutor.

"One of the things I enjoy doing is deflating the balloon of hypocrisy in society, the real phonies," he said in explaining the attraction of this area for him. "That's really where it's at with society. A crook is a crook—it's a lot different when someone's up on a soapbox."