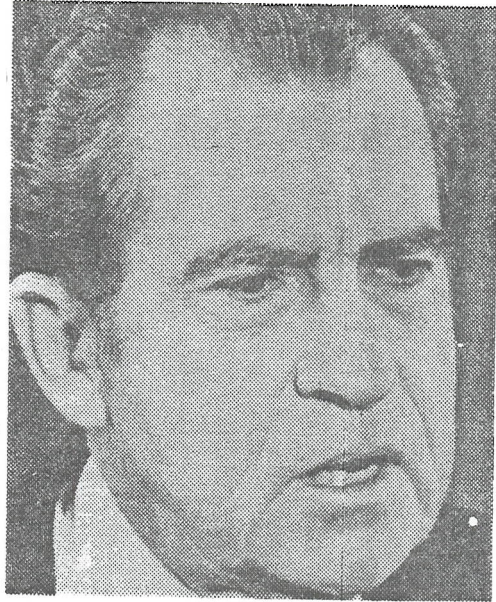


*Rowland Evans and Robert Novak*

# Resignation, Accusation And Confusion



*President Nixon*

President Nixon's shocking accusation to two groups of Republican senators that his former Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, lied about the firing of Archibald Cox as Special Prosecutor goes to the heart of White House confusion which caused the Saturday night massacre and shook the Nixon presidency.

All key officials in the Special Prosecutor's office and at the Justice Department support Mr. Richardson's sworn testimony that he never agreed to prohibit Mr. Cox from issuing further subpoenas for presidential papers. Mr. Nixon had no personal dialogue about it with Mr. Richardson. So, the President's accusation is based on a single source: the version by Gen. Alexander Haig, White House chief of staff, of his conversations with Mr. Richardson—a version lacking other first-person support.

Consequently, Mr. Nixon's assault on Mr. Richardson, besides reiterating the President's inclination to counterattack sharply when cornered, reveals the fragility of decision-making at the White House. Considering General Haig's well-established integrity, the most charitable explanation of what happened is inexcusable confusion in the upper reaches of the White House.

There is no dispute that Mr. Richardson accepted the White House compromise calling for Sen. John Stennis to oversee editing of subpoenaed tape recordings and tried, unsuccessfully, to

sell the plan to Mr. Cox. The dispute concerns Mr. Richardson's reaction to Mr. Cox's rejection. All evidence indicates Mr. Richardson opposed either firing Mr. Cox or prohibiting his quest for new documents after Mr. Cox rejected the Stennis compromise.

Indeed, Mr. Richardson's position was clear enough on Monday, Oct. 15, beginning the fateful week so costly to the Nixon presidency. White House lawyers mentioned to Mr. Richardson the view of Yale professor Alexander Bickel, that Mr. Nixon could circumvent an adverse Supreme Court decision on the tapes by firing Mr. Cox and naming a more congenial Special Prosecutor. Mr. Richardson made clear he would have no part of this, and the Bickel option was dropped.

But by Thursday evening, after having failed to convince Mr. Cox to accept the Stennis compromise, Mr. Richardson feared the White House was about to fire Mr. Cox anyway. So, on Friday morning, he told General Haig he wanted to see the President immediately. If he could not convince Mr. Nixon, Mr. Richardson was prepared to resign. Mr. Richardson was then informed Mr. Cox was not going to be fired but was denied a meeting with the President.

The critically important prohibition against Mr. Cox came up later that day. At the Justice Department, there was no doubt that Mr. Richardson opposed any such prohibition. General Haig insists that Mr. Richardson actu-

ally proposed the prohibition, though this is utterly inconsistent with his past positions.

General Haig, apparently, sincerely believed Mr. Richardson was in step with the White House, which would have hopelessly isolated Mr. Cox. That was what General Haig informed presidential counselors Melvin R. Laird and Bryce Harlow Friday, Oct. 19, when they were belatedly informed of the Stennis compromise. Had they known Mr. Richardson opposed the key prohibition provision, these two political veterans might well have advised caution.

After Mr. Richardson refused to fire Mr. Cox on Saturday, Oct. 20, General Haig told Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus that Mr. Richardson had approved the entire Stennis compromise. Mr. Ruckelshaus retorted that simply was not true and also refused to fire Mr. Cox. Thus, General Haig's understanding of Mr. Richardson's position was challenged during the height of the Saturday night massacre.

Since then, White House aides have attempted to blame the ensuing crisis on Mr. Richardson, charging that he misled the President and then misrepresented his own position publicly. That Mr. Nixon himself should pick up this theme a month later is explicable only in the context of counterattack dominating his sessions with Republican congressmen last week.

The first presidential attack against





*Elliot Richardson*

Mr. Richardson came during Tuesday night's session with Republican senators when Mr. Nixon asserted that the former Attorney General had agreed to the Stennis compromise in full. Sen. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts then informed the President that Mr. Richardson had told him he did not agree to the prohibition against Mr. Cox. "He didn't tell you the truth," Mr. Nixon shot back. Senators present were stunned, with Brooke whispering, "this is incredible."

That exchange did not leak out. But in meeting the second group of Republican senators Wednesday night, Mr. Nixon made it clear his accusation the previous evening was no accident. Asked about Mr. Cox's firing on the very last question, the President attacked Mr. Richardson again: "He did not tell the truth." Sen. Charles Mathias of Maryland noted Mr. Richardson testified under oath, but Mr. Nixon snapped back: "Nobody's going to go after him for perjury."

Mathias, outraged by the attack on Mr. Richardson's integrity, wants the Senate Judiciary Committee to find where the truth lies. That inevitably would trigger an inquest into the Saturday night massacre and a further split among Republicans, unneeded by Mr. Nixon now. But such self-inflicted wounds have inevitably resulted from the counterattack strategy, doggedly followed by Mr. Nixon in confronting Watergate.