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# Misjudged Nixon motives, say Cox, Richardson

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WASHINGTON — One year after the Saturday Night Massacre, the two principal victims, Archibald Cox and Elliot Richardson, say in hindsight they had misjudged Richard Nixon's reluctance to release the White House tapes.

"My original premise was that his (Nixon's) most important objective was to achieve some compromise that would resolve the issue of the subpoenaed tapes," Richardson, the former attorney general, said in an interview.

Four of the principals of the last year's massacre were interviewed on the anniversary of the explosive incident. Three had no regrets as to their positions at the time, and the fourth was sorry only that he had not "gone public" sooner than he did.

"I gave a good deal of thought during subsequent weeks to whether I might have averted the firing of Cox, and also averted the resignations of (Deputy Atty. Gen. William D.) Ruckelshaus and myself," Richardson said. "I came eventually to the conclusion that it could not have been done.

"I came to that conclusion, really, only after several months when I decided the only way you could account for the events of that week was on the basis that the President had determined from the outset that what he really wanted was to get rid of Mr. Cox.

"At any rate, he (Nixon) chose a strategy which involved being forced back, stop by step, never yielding any more ground than he could prevent."

If was the evening of Oct. 20, 1973, that an angered Nixon ordered Cox fired because the special Watergate prosecutor earlier that day had publicly refused to abandon his court battle to obtain the secret White House tapes.

The firing, achieved only after Richardson and Ruckelshaus left office in protest, precipitated a "firestorm" of public protest which led directly to House impeachment proceedings and eventually to Nixon's resignation Aug. 9.

Cox, interviewed at Cambridge University in England, where he is teaching this year, said he might have fought more vigorously for the subpoenaed materials had he realized Nixon's true intentions.

"I was under the impression from Attorney General Richardson that they (the White House) were going to supply it voluntarily," he said.

"If I had felt this was not so, I suppose I would have started getting out the subpoenas quicker."

U.S. Solicitor General Robert H. Bork said he finally consented to fire Cox that night, and to stay on, "too see that there was no disarray in the executive branch and no mass departures from the Department of Justice."

Bork remained as acting attorney general until William B. Saxbe was sworn in last January. He then returned to the solicitor general's job.

Ruckelshaus said that looking back, he would have insisted on a meeting with Nixon about the tapes earlier that week "so he could have seen first hand, so he could have heard first hand from his attorney general how he viewed the whole problem."

Neither Cox, Richardson nor Ruckelshaus expressed regret over their positions that fateful Saturday night a year ago.