

Petersen Quits as Assistant Attorney



Associated Press
Henry E. Petersen

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH
WASHINGTON, NOV. 5 —

Henry E. Petersen, insisting that he had no regrets over his handling of the original Watergate investigation, resigned today as chief of the Justice Department's Criminal Division.

The resignation of the Assistant Attorney General was announced by the White House, which released a warm letter of regret from President Ford. Mr. Petersen's departure, to take effect Dec. 31, will end a generally highly acclaimed 27-year career in the Justice Department.

That career was marred by widespread public and official

questioning of his decision early last year to provide President Nixon with details of the then widening grand jury inquiry into the Watergate cover-up. Mr. Nixon subsequently relayed Mr. Petersen's information to his aides in an effort, according to tape recordings of White House conversations, to coordinate cover-up stories.

Asked about his role as a go-between for the President, Mr. Petersen told a news conference late this afternoon, "I don't regret it and I don't think I would have done anything different."

He said that the choice had simply been whether to tell the

President what he wanted to know about the progress of the secret grand jury proceedings. At the time, in April, 1973, the grand jury was beginning to unravel the involvement of Mr. Nixon's two top aides, John D. Ehrlichman and H. R. Halde- man, in the Watergate cover-up.

"I don't see that there was any alternative" other than to provide the information, Mr. Petersen told newsmen. "If you assume that you can't trust the President you're in trouble and that's all there is to it."

"So," he added, "despite the fact that there's been criticism, I'm afraid, if I had to do it all

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General; Defends Watergate Role

over again, I think I'd make the same decision."

Shortly after the White House released the initial batch of White House tapes this spring, there were published reports that Mr. Petersen's decision to deal directly with Mr. Nixon on grand jury matters had led to a deep rift between him and the three original Watergate prosecutors, headed by Earl J. Silbert, now the Acting United States Attorney for the District of Columbia.

Mr. Silbert and others repeatedly warned Mr. Petersen at the time, one official recalled, that he was a potential witness

in future Watergate trials and, therefore, could not continue to advise the President.

Both Mr. Petersen and Ron Nessen, the White House press secretary, said today that the resignation was voluntary. Mr. Petersen, who is 53 years old, said that after his departure he would practice law. This would apparently be with a private firm.

In his letter, President Ford praised Mr. N. Petersen for "a record of unique achievement," adding, "Your ability, integrity, candor and good humor will be sorely missed but fondly remembered by those with whom you served."

Defending the department's original inquiry, he told the Senate Watergate committee in the summer of 1973, "I resent the appointment of a special prosecutor. I think it is a reflection on me and the Department of Justice."

Similarly after newsmen queried him about his close association with Mr. Nixon, he said, "I walked through a minefield and came out clean."

Yet it was Mr. Petersen who publicly signed a press release before the 1972 Presidential election in which the initial Watergate inquiry was praised as being "among the most exhaustive and far-reaching in my 25 years in the department."