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London Press Twits

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LONDON — Elliot Richardson has been getting a rough ride in the press here lately and he does not like it.

When he arrived as a U.S. ambassador in March, he was almost universally hailed as "Mr. Clean," the shining knight of Washington's "Saturday Night Massacre."

A Daily Mail headline summed up the general reaction to Richardson's appointment: "He is cultured, elegant, rich, stylish and a hero of Normandy and Watergate."

But last week's report of the Watergate Special Prosecutor described Richardson's efforts to limit the inquiries of Archibald Cox, the first special prosecutor, and the papers here pounced on the ambassador like lovers betrayed.

Fred Emery, the London

Times correspondent, tucked away a few paragraphs on Richardson in his balanced account of the report, suggesting that the ambassador "emerges as somewhat less than the hero some have painted him."

Nigel Wade in the Daily Telegraph began his piece by saying that "Richardson, white knight of the Watergate scandal ... emerges with tarnished armor." The harshest treatment was administered by The Observer, which detailed all the report's instances of attempts to rein Cox in.

In a chat at his Grosvenor Square office, Richardson acknowledged that "I am not wholly indifferent" and that he was "irritated" by the accounts.

Lawyer-like, he was eager to explain in detail each of the

suggestions he had made to Cox as Nixon's attorney general. He complained that the press reports showed little historical sense or understanding of his role.

He would not quarrel with the prosecutor's report, but argued that the newspaper accounts overlooked the fact that he had appointed Cox and had laid down the broad guidelines under which the Harvard Law School professor operated.

His own position, he said, was difficult, and he compared it to walking through a mine field, step by step.

"I knew and he (Cox) knew I knew he was in a position of total independence. I wasn't the White House lawyer. I was in the middle. I came to regard myself as a broker between the President's lawyers and Cox.

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Richardson on Watergate

"I was trying to keep the situation from falling apart."

The real test of whether he curbed Cox is Cox' own view, Richardson suggested. He pointed to Cox' testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1973, a month after Cox had been fired by Nixon.

There, Cox said, "The attorney general never put any improper or even questionable pressure on me. There is not the least doubt about that. We talked about these things as problems and tried to reason them out together. He was sort of caught in the middle ... He is a man of honor."

The ambassador is trying not to be thin-skinned about the rash of unfavorable stories. "Anything on

Richardson is news" in Britain, he remarked, and the reporters went through the special prosecutor's report, "looking for something newsworthy."

But seated at a lunch next to Jocelyn Stevens, managing director of the Beaverbrook newspapers, Richardson could not resist pulling out a

clip from the "William Hickey" gossip column in that day's Daily Express as an example of careless journalism. "Hickey," the collective pen name for several gossipers, had reported that Richardson was "writing his own version" of Watergate to refute "smears."

In fact, Richardson says, he is well into an extended essay on the relationship between the individual and government, a book tentatively titled

"The Creative Balance." He said he plans to have one chapter on Watergate, not as memoir or defense, but to illustrate his larger themes.

The whole episode reflects a mutual frustration. The press here is fascinated by any American ambassador, but the nature of modern diplomacy almost precludes his making substantive news.

In a large embassy in a country like Britain with few bilateral problems, technical negotiations over trade, airlines and other matters are carried on by technicians. Grand policy is fixed between principals — president and prime minister or foreign ministers. An American ambassador here has little more than a ceremonial role.

Richardson will not say this, but he appears to be frustrated, too. He is an

ambitious man and there is little of substance here for him to do.

At various times, he thought of making himself an expert on economic policy and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; or the attempt to standardize weapons among NATO allies; or the stalled negotiations to cut troop levels in the Soviet bloc and the West. But none of these avenues has proved fruitful.

He is evidently thinking of a political future that will bring him back to Washington. Some of his friends are urging that he demonstrate his vote-getting ability by taking on Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) for the Senate in 1976. But the risks of opposing a Kennedy in Massachusetts are obvious, and Richardson has not yet given this idea much encouragement.