

## INTERVIEW OF ELLIOT L. RICHARDSON

by Howard P. Willens

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- Willens: Elliot L. Richardson has served over the years in a number of very important Cabinet positions with great distinction. I'm interviewing Mr. Richardson today with respect to his service as Under Secretary of State during 1969 to 1970 in the first years of the Nixon Administration. Mr. Richardson, by way of beginning, could you give me a little bit of background as to how you became Under Secretary of State in 1969?
- Richardson: I've never known. I had known Nixon in the Eisenhower Administration. I served briefly at HEW and became the U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts in 1959. I had a chance to meet him as a member of a substantive advisory group in 1960 when he was running for President. He also spoke at my deficit fundraising dinner in Massachusetts in 1965. I also met him in Miami at the convention of 1968. But the idea of my becoming number two at the State Department came out of the blue in a phone call from John Mitchell. I had already turned down the number two job at HEW. I was then serving in Massachusetts as Attorney General of the State. But the job of number two in State was always a job that I had revered. So I came down to Washington and met with Bill Rogers. But I led off by trying to convince him that it was a big mistake for him to bring me in as number two. Because I said to Bill, "I don't know any more about foreign policy than you do."
- Willens: You were speaking to Bill Rogers?
- Richardson: Yes. Whom I'd known when he was Attorney General and I was the U.S. Attorney. I said, "You need somebody good, with a real background in foreign policy." But I didn't convince him and the opportunity was too appealing. So I came, but I've never known who suggested me or how my name came forward.
- Willens: Do you have a recollection as to how this issue of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands first came to your attention?
- Richardson: Well, I'll tell you. How closely my recollection accords with the facts I don't know. But I do have one overriding impression. You couldn't be a part of the Nixon foreign policy establishment or team without beginning to absorb some of Nixon's overarching strategic or geo-strategic perspective. I won't elaborate on that now, but I have never lost the opportunity to emphasize that the architect of the Nixon foreign policy was Nixon. And I, of course, began early on to be drawn into the problems of Vietnam and extrication from Vietnam, and that raised a whole lot of questions about the shape of the South Pacific Rim and the stability of the geo-strategic situation there after the war. I raised with the President very early the question of steps that could be taken toward normalization of U.S. relations with China. I thought it was obvious that the United States needed to be in a position to project defensive military power on the other side of the Pacific. I began to think about basing rights in the U.S. in those circumstances. Then something, I don't know what it was, awakened me to the awareness that the United States was the sole trustee of a U.N. mandate for the only strategic trusteeship under the U.N. Trusteeship Council for all the Southwest Pacific. I don't remember how this came to me, but I thought that it might be important to us, granted that this area was a good many miles (perhaps more than a thousand miles) east of Cam Ranh Bay. Nevertheless, we were not able to use Cam Ranh Bay as our basing. The Philippines, for some reason, would cease to be available.

We needed a fallback. I think what brought it to my attention was that somebody came in to talk about the fact that the U.N. was steering around on the question of termination of the Trusteeship. I think that was what raised it. There was going to be a referendum of some kind and the question was, I think, how would we come out in such a referendum? So I began to check on what we had been doing to maintain our relationship and good will in the area. I was appalled to discover that the answer was practically nothing. That the expenditures for education, the quality of education had deteriorated and it was abysmally low, that there was a large amount of joblessness, that we were doing nothing to create employment or to cultivate the new fishing industry, that the only significant economic presence were the Japanese who were sending down some tourists and whose fishing vessels were using the area to fish. I thought this was shockingly neglectful, given the prospect that in order to continue to use the area we would have to win more votes. So the next thing I recall was meeting with an assistant secretary of the Interior. Given the fact that if significantly more money was going to be spent on improving the U.S. image relationship in the area, it would have to be administered by Interior. The result of that was that Edgar Kaiser, Jr. became the person designated to handle it and he was the only one who from then on I remember dealing with about it at Interior.

Willens: Do you remember an assistant secretary named Harrison Loesch?

Richardson: Vaguely familiar, but I don't remember.

Willens: It looks as though as a result of what you have just recalled, that there were some briefing papers prepared for you and other members of the Under Secretaries Committee that tried to review what had been done and what the pending issues were. I've shown you one of those, dated March 19, 1969. Do you recall whether you instructed the staff at State to prepare briefing papers of this kind that would provide the background and what had been done?

Richardson: I'm sure I did. Claus Ruser was the number two guy. Parenthetically, after it was announced that I was the Under Secretary of State designate, although, as I said, essentially lacking in foreign policy (the only foreign policy background I had, such as it was, was that I had been the president of the World Affairs Council of Boston), my first assignment in the transition was to deal with Henry Kissinger on the structure and functions of the NSC system.

Willens: I read one account that suggested you were the representative of the State Department that expressed certain views regarding the reorganization of a critical nature.

Richardson: Well, one thing that came out of it in any event was the creation of the Under Secretaries Committee, which I chaired.

Willens: Did you regard the Under Secretaries Committee as a useful mechanism in dealing with issues like this?

Richardson: Oh yes. My counterparts were, of course, Dave Packard, number two at Defense; the Under Secretary of the Treasury, Charls Walker; and the Under Secretary at Labor, Jim Hudson, who were active members. I had a small staff headed by Art Hartman who later was Assistant Secretary and Ambassador to France. And his number two was Claus Ruser.

Willens: I see.

Richardson: There were maybe a couple of other people. And my immediate staff included several others. I do remember Mort Abramowitz who had a number of jobs later on.

- Willens: The memorandum does review what the previous Administration had tried to accomplish through the introduction of legislation to create a presidential commission. This had passed the Senate but failed in the House of Representatives due in large part to opposition from Congressman Aspinall. So the discussion in the Under Secretaries Committee seems to have resulted in a very different approach. Namely, the idea of having Secretary Hickel visit Micronesia and announce publicly, for the first time, that the United States was interested in a permanent relationship with the Micronesians. Do you recall why you and the other members of the Committee decided to reject the old approach and adopt something that left the Executive Branch more or less in control?
- Richardson: Well I thought it was a very clear cut case, as I already said, of the need to address a significant strategic problem which had been neglected and that it might leave us behind the eight ball if we didn't get on the stick. And so the only question was, what can we do to communicate quickly to the people in the area that, despite our recent behavior, we really cared about what happened to them and that we were capable of being a responsible and benevolent trustee. And there were things we didn't need to ask Congress about to do that. But it was basically that simple, it didn't occur to me that we needed to talk to Aspinall. All we needed to do was to get the Interior Department to scrape together some resources, go out there, and see what they could accomplish.
- Willens: Do you recall any discussions during your tenure with Congressman Aspinall about the future of the Trust Territory?
- Richardson: No. I see there is a memorandum there.
- Willens: There is a memorandum dated April 2, 1969 under Tab 2, but it principally was a meeting about a Micronesian war claims issue and the question of status came up only incidentally. There on page 1 there is a statement in the memorandum that Congressman Aspinall stated that he was glad to see Secretaries Train and Richardson and "when the Departments of Interior, State and Defense mutually agree on a plan for settling the future political status of the TTPI, he would be glad to consider it." He had taken the position for many years that the Executive Branch departments needed to formulate a common position. As a result of the Under Secretaries consideration, there was a proposal that seems to have been supported by you for the appointment of a special assistant to the President that would coordinate this effort.
- Richardson: Didn't we adopt that?
- Willens: Well, eventually. But your memo in April 1969 indicates that Secretary Hickel opposed the appointment of a special assistant. And in fact nothing was done for two years. Then your recollection is correct. F. Haydn Williams of the Asia Foundation was eventually appointed in March of 1971. Two years later.
- Richardson: That's when the issues of the subdivision and the Marianas, and who would be in and who would be directly under the U.S., got much more complicated. It hadn't come across my line of vision yet. If I had any significant strength as a manager here, it is the clarity of mind involved in seeing the problem relatively completely and clearly. And to my mind, as I said in the beginning, there was one big thing here, which was the realization that we had to get on the stick. This was a truly important strategic area and the U.S. could not afford to lose by default or neglect. The objective was to obtain control of it and the only question was, then, how do we accomplish that?
- Willens: Were your views about the defense importance of the area shaped to any degree by conversations with Secretary Laird or his deputy, Mr. Packard?

Richardson: No. You might say I came into the job unburdened, and I soon began to get the hang of it. Probably the most important single trigger to this was Nixon's trip to Eastern Europe, and most especially his decision to stop in Bucharest. I asked myself, why Bucharest? And of course you didn't have to ask Nixon or anybody else to see that the answer was Chairman Ceausescu. He was the only head of state in the Soviet Bloc who (a) had insisted on maintaining relations with the PRC and (b) had publicly made known his resistance to the Brezhnev talks, which were designed to rationalize Soviet intervention in the internal affairs of any of the Eastern European Soviet Bloc countries. And so Nixon's visit in effect communicated the message that we intended to move toward a greater degree of normalization in relations with Eastern Europe so far as circumstances permit. And I got the idea right away. I immediately requested a review of all of the bilateral problems between the United States and Eastern Europe so that we could consider it. I should back up a little bit. Nixon's overarching approach was to strengthen the capacity of the United States to maintain a stable stalemate in the Cold War by reducing the risk of divisionary conflicts that could drain resources and so on and did not have paramount relationship to the maintenance of the primary stalemate. And that was reflected in his enunciation of the Guam Doctrine very early on, with the effect of countries in the free world within alliances like SEATO and so on, should maximize their own ability to defend themselves. But the reduction of the risks of outbreaks of tension in Eastern Europe was consistent with that. So I checked out the Hungarian crown jewels, the Romanian gold, and Cardinal Mindszenty. This is what took me to China, and the question of how we could solve it. About that time I sent Nixon a memorandum. Walt Stroessel was then conducting talks in Warsaw, which weren't going anywhere, and I sent Nixon a memorandum in March or so of 1969 with five things that we could do if we wished to convey seriously to China the prospect of moving toward normalization of relations with China. And I gave a speech in September of 1969 arguing that an equilateral triangle composed of the United States-Japan, USSR and the PRC was a much more stable structure than two mutually opposed flat surfaces, with the U.S.-Japan on one side and the Soviet Union on the other, with China either neutral or marginally backing the Soviet Union. I only go into all of that because this kind of approach led me to think about how the United States was going to maintain its role in the preservation of this strategic balance. Then in turn they project a drastic contingency, a lack of access to the Philippines or anywhere else, and here was an area which was already mandated to us, and it would be foolish to let it get out from under us simply because we hadn't done enough to win an election.

Willens: The documents seem to reflect considerable concern about the reversion of Okinawa, the withdrawal from the Ryukyus, the possible need to withdraw from the Philippine bases that you've made reference to, and all this in turn infused with significance because of the Vietnam conflict. Is that the way, or was it independent of what was going on?

Richardson: More post-Vietnam.

Willens: Looking to post-Vietnam stability in that part of the world.

Richardson: It was Cam Ranh Bay. Indeed the Philippines were predicated on there being no Vietnam war. Because Cam Ranh Bay was there to some Vietnamese regime and the Philippines might break out on their own in a situation in which there was no military crisis in the region. Indeed they eventually did when I was on my watch as the President's personal representative for the economic programs in the Philippines, a time when I was forced to keep my mouth shut on the bases issue.

Willens: Did you ever talk to President Nixon about the Trust Territory and what your thinking was with respect to it?

Richardson: No, not that I remember.

Willens: I assume that his stop in Guam was just a matter of convenience for travel purposes. Was the stop in Guam in any way motivated by a desire to focus on the status of Guam and the Trust Territory?

Richardson: I don't know. You would have to ask his staff about that. I don't remember knowing he was going to make this thing in advance. But my focus on it was retrospective and in the light of its implications for the aggregate thrust of what he was trying to do. If you add to the macro structure, number one, when we talk about this, the diminution of risk of collateral conflicts and the improvement of capability of friendly countries to take care of themselves. Number two, the reduction of risks of open conflict with the Soviet Union through various policies then called detente. And the third was arms control, especially reduction of the control of nuclear weapons. And all those things were characteristic of Nixon. He thought of these things as coordinates. He was the only President—you know, I don't have any reason to think kindly of Nixon. Indeed, I think he deliberately didn't realize until months after my resignation that I thought that he and Haig were genuinely seeking an understanding with Cox and I was the middleman to that end. But the only explanation of what happened was that they intended to precipitate some occasion for firing Cox that I would defend. And I wasn't used to being stubborn that way, especially after all the years in service. So I have known—but for some reason, I do not like to see Nixon's strengths go without adequate recognition. Maybe it has something to do with the indirect sense of pride that many of us had, the sense of pride and satisfaction we had in being part of his Administration. And you know my dealings with Nixon up to my resignation were impeccable. He was extremely supportive, understanding. I had no interference in my appointments in my departments. I was the Chairman of the Committee on Ambassadorial Appointments in State from day one. The only guy that I had to deal with was Peter Flanigan who had a list of eighteen people that would be taken care in some Embassy. They never added to the list. Nixon had already made a number of appointments, career people who were people he had come to know during his interlude of global traveling. But after that, they never added to the list, except one guy. The only bearing of that is perhaps that I wanted to see Nixon's positive side. Recognize that I also don't think he's nearly as interesting a character as you. You don't realize how far ahead he was. But in a foreign sense, you know I thought this all through my time at HEW. Well, that's about all I mean. I could look at this stuff but it would be like my looking at the...

Willens: No, I understand that. Just let me ask a few questions and it's interesting to me that you did recommend a special assistant because the State Department for years had been urging that this kind of problem involved not just Interior, but State and Defense, and it ought to have more White House involvement. Do you recall any conversations with Secretary Hickel about that issue or did you press to have a special assistant appointed?

Richardson: I honestly can't. I think if they had made a big thing about it, I probably would recall it.

Willens: As you said, it eventually was done two years later.

Richardson: You know, I can't resist this. I already told you my story of dealing with Kerry on MIA's. One of Kissinger's recent books, I'm told, includes the observation that Nixon's most important foreign policy initiative was the declaration that the United States would regard very seriously any Soviet aggression against or incursion of Chinese territory. And Bill Bundy, you know Bill probably, spent ten years on a book on the Nixon foreign policy and he independently concluded this was the most important foreign policy initiative in the

Nixon Administration. Guess who announced it? It was me. Bundy called me and wanted to know how come, why did they give it to me, and how the decision was made. I couldn't remember anything about it. It's too bad. The biggest thing I ever did, you know.

Willens: Do you recall any discussion with Dr. Kissinger about this issue? In that connection, there is a memo in the notebook I have provided you of a meeting with Dr. Kissinger that was attended by Secretary Rogers, Secretary Hickel and (I think) Assistant Secretary Nutter from Defense. The issue was whether to offer the Micronesians constitutional convention legislation and the Inter-Agency Committee recommended that course of action and Dr. Kissinger rejected it. It's under Tab 15, it's the memorandum for the record that Mr. Peale provided based on his debriefing of Assistant Secretary DePalma. This took place after the first set of discussions with the Micronesians and there had been very limited movement forward on that. So, the Under Secretaries Committee thought that there should be a change in the U.S. position. Do you have any recollection of this issue and why Dr. Kissinger decided that the United States should not change its position but should proceed more slowly in these negotiations?

Richardson: No.

Willens: Secretary Rogers attended the meeting and he had been briefed by staff before the meeting and generally agreed with the position of the Under Secretaries Committee. He apparently, according to this memorandum, took a somewhat different position at the meeting with Dr. Kissinger.

Richardson: Where? I don't see any reference to the Under Secretaries Committee proposing.

Willens: There was an Interior proposal to try to reach some compromise with the Micronesians on the land issue but the inter-agency group and then at the Secretarial level it was decided that they should reject Mr. Hickel's approach and they should not present this constitutional convention approach. Does that trigger any recollection at all?

Richardson: No, but I don't see any reference to . . .

Willens: You don't see any reference to it?

Richardson: The bottom paragraph of page two, where it mentions a broader approach but I don't see any reference to the Under Secretaries Committee in that respect.

Willens: Well, that's fair enough. After Secretary Hickel's visit out there, there were plans within the Executive Branch to prepare for the first round of discussions with the Micronesians. One of the issues that was of concern to the State Department in particular was whether the Micronesians ought to be offered the option of independence. The State Department for years had always argued that, in order to fulfill the U.S. commitments under the Trusteeship Agreement, you would have to offer the Micronesians, on a ballot, the option of independence. But it appears that in 1969 because of the developments out in the Trust Territory and these concerns that you referred to, the Under Secretaries Committee and the State Department decided not to offer the option of independence and rather to pursue bringing in the Micronesians under the sovereignty of the United States as a territory. What is your recollection of that independence option and whether you thought it was important to either provide it or not.

Richardson: Well, my whole approach would have militated against the offer of independence, because that would lead to subsequent unilateral determination. Whether or not we had any right to maintain a military presence, the whole idea was that we needed some footing, at least in some of the area in which we could base ships and planes and standby troops.

- Willens: Based on the information you had available, did you or your staff feel that, if independence was offered as an option, the Micronesians might vote for it?
- Richardson: I don't remember what I thought about that or whether I thought about it. I probably need to say what I said in the beginning, my contribution in my mind was to raise the level of priority to achieve an outcome that ended the Trusteeship [in a way] such that the U.S. would have a strategic base. I don't remember being much involved in the question of how exactly that was to be done. My assistant there was Ruser. The only person I remember being physically with in my office, more than once, was Kaysen, but it needs to be clear that as number two in State, I took as my problems everything that State did. I think I could fairly claim that, by the time I left, I knew more about U.S. involvement with the rest of the world than any single person at State. I was working as a member of the group that developed the proposals with strategic arms reduction. I dealt with Rabin and the local, the U.S. Senator, the Ambassador of Jordan, on the Middle East. I was involved with problems with respect to China, the political settlement with Vietnam, I had the principal role in initiating the mutual imbalance force reduction negotiations, and a lot of other stuff.
- Willens: How did you think this worked out by the time you left State in 1970? There had been two rounds of discussions or negotiations with the Micronesians and in 1970 the Micronesians had articulated the so-called four principles, saying that they had to have sovereignty and they had to have the ability to terminate the relationship unilaterally. They had to be able to draft their own constitution and so forth. It comes across in the documents as a very sort of radical change from what had been previously anticipated, and required some reassessment of U.S. policy.
- Richardson: I can't honestly say what I thought, except that they weren't about to get that.
- Willens: That they were not going to get that?
- Richardson: Yes. Curiously, years later when I was with the U.S. Law of the Sea delegation, I became quite helpful to the Micronesians. They had a lawyer. I think he was with Covington & Burling. He represented them and was respected in the Law of the Sea area and I remember being helpful in the meeting with them, representing their delegation. Representing all of the Micronesians.
- Willens: The position early on with respect to the Law of the Sea was that there would be no different rule applicable to Micronesia than was applicable to the continental United States. Isn't that correct?
- Richardson: Yes, it would take me a minute but they had to get special language I know.
- Willens: It became an issue later on and, in fact, it still is an issue with respect to some of those islands out there exactly what their authority is over the waters.
- Richardson: I don't think there was ever any doubt that they would get two hundred miles out of us.
- Willens: As you know, the Northern Marianas eventually did become a Commonwealth under U.S. sovereignty and that was the relationship that I was involved in, and the other parts of the Trust Territory have now gone three separate ways with respect to the Marshall Islands, Palau, and what is called the Federated States of Micronesia. In some respects these relationships are called free association, which was a relatively new concept for United States officials back in the 60's, in the 1970's. Do you recall having any discussion about what free association meant and whether it was a relationship that would enable the United States to protect its defense and strategic objectives in the Western Pacific?

- Richardson: I remember the phrase all right, but I can't clearly recall whether it was one that surfaced while I was still at State or ran into later at Defense.
- Willens: I wondered about that. I know you were at Defense in 1973 and that happens to have been a fairly critical time with respect to Defense planning for the island of Tinian, which was one of the Mariana islands that the United States wanted to either purchase or lease most of it for contingency purposes and perhaps to construct a base. In fact, it was about in 1973 when the Defense Department decided that it could not commit to construction of a base on the island of Tinian because they didn't think that Congress would approve it and provide the necessary funds. Did you have any recollection of defense issues with respect to the Northern Mariana islands, in particular Tinian, during the short time you were at Defense?
- Richardson: Well, it rings a distant bell but I don't have any clear recollection.
- Willens: Did you recommend Haydn Williams or others to fill the position of a special assistant at the time this was being considered by Dr. Kissinger's office? It wasn't announced until March of 1971, but apparently Dr. Kissinger wrote a memo urging it in late 1970 and the documents are somewhat unclear as to where the idea came from and whether it goes back to the proposal that you made earlier.
- Richardson: I remember talking to Williams about this.
- Willens: Before he was appointed?
- Richardson: Yes, I think so. I think I was for his appointment. I don't think I would have elected to be involved with it at all unless I had become so before the end of . . . . After all, I was gone from State in May of '70 or June. You know, in many ways one's life takes all kinds of arbitrarily determined twists.
- Willens: Why did you leave State to go over to HEW?
- Richardson: Well, it's interesting you should ask about that. It's just what I was thinking about. Why did I go? I expect it was because I knew a lot about the department and those issues. I had been in that department three years in the Eisenhower Administration, which is when I really had gotten to know Nixon. As Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts, I asked for and got delegated responsibility for state human service agencies. So I took a lot of interest in it and had some genuine background for it, but I suspect beyond that the idea of being a Cabinet member probably had some influence. It was sort of, "Who me, a member of the Cabinet?" reaction. But in the years since then, I have often been asked what job in the government I liked best. And I either duck it or, if I feel like it, I say, "Well, if you insist, I would have to tell you it was the number two job at State. That was a good job."
- Willens: Did you follow any of these issues over the next decade or so as the negotiations with Micronesia continued for really ten to fifteen years and were resolved only, I guess some would say, with the termination of the Trusteeship in 1986 as to all aspects of it, except Palau, and only recently has the Republic of Palau been organized.
- Richardson: I didn't follow them much. My general habit in life has been not to look back. I'm sure that nobody has ever asked me how did you get all those jobs, and I have never been sure. I never asked for any of them, I never anticipated any of these particular changes that occurred. But I was a law clerk for Frankfurter and I expect Frankfurter had probably had begun to hanker for a Supreme Court appointment long before he got one. And I wondered whether his awareness that maybe he might never have gotten one at all underlay the advice he gave me very solemnly one day. He said, "It's a great mistake to fix any specific future goal in terms of the status or position. You can wake up at the age



of 57 forced to realize you are never going to get there. So you've schemed and calculated over time, promoting these thoughts, this prospect over decades perhaps." "You're much better off," he said, "enjoying the job at hand." And I thought that was good advice and I have always followed that. I've never given any thought of what I did yesterday or what I might do tomorrow. I wouldn't be surprised if this gave me some incremental margin for effectiveness because this expenditure of time and emotion involved, and the energy, was not to be into anything else. But there, you know, the past is sort of closed behind me in the way the water closes behind a boat moving through the water.

Willens: That is very, very instructive.

Richardson: And the waters ahead of me are filled with the need to see at the wheel, you know, looking at the wheel and the compass, just touring along, returning to the days of the kind of equipment we had in my days as a sailor.

Willens: Is there anything else that you can remember about this particular set of issues?

Richardson: Not really, not really, no. If you haven't talked to Hartman, Ruser, Jonathan Moore . . .

Willens: Do you know where Ruser is located?

Richardson: No, no.

Willens: I'm in touch with Mr. Hartman. He has some reluctance because he maintains that he was principally a traffic cop sort of functioning as Executive Director for the Under Secretaries Committee.

Richardson: I don't think he ever personally had a lot to do with it.

Willens: With the substance, that's right. But he and I are going to continue talking and I hope I can interview him.

Richardson: But it ought to be possible to find Ruser. The last I knew he was working for an aluminum company, which had something to do with Venezuela.

Willens: Do you remember Samuel DePalma who was the Assistant Secretary?

Richardson: Oh yes, good guy.

Willens: I interviewed him and he was very helpful and he or his staff were actively engaged in these matters.

Richardson: Well, you might talk to Abramowitz. He may know where Ruser is.

Willens: Okay.

Richardson: Abramowitz was at the time my most junior career assistant. But I took a great shine to him early on. I had a lot to do with his rapid advancement.

Willens: Let's go off the record then. Thank you very much, Mr. Richardson. It's really been very, very valuable.