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TIME

Nation: Finch: First Casualty of the Nixon Cabinet

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SOON after becoming Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Robert Finch confided to an interviewer: "I am the most liberal member of this Cabinet." That was not the only distinction possessed by Richard Nixon's youngest and most attractive department chief, now 44. Finch's almost filial relationship with the President, going back nearly 25 years, was the most personal claimed by any Cabinet officer. He had the most promising political future in the group. For all these great expectations, Finch has been the most abused and frustrated high official in Washington. Last week he became the first of Richard Nixon's Cabinet appointees to be replaced.

The move, which was not a complete surprise, came out daubed with the most cheerful hues possible under the circumstances. As Nixon personally made the announcement to newsmen, there was no suggestion of the controversies that had come between the two men or of the dissatisfaction that Nixon had begun to feel. Rather, the President said that he needed his "oldest and closest friend and associate" near by in the White House. He will have the title of Counsellor to the President, travel with the President at home and abroad, and provide advice on both domestic and certain foreign subjects. "I regret losing him at HEW," the President said. "But I need him here." Succeeding him at HEW will be Elliot Richardson, now Under Secretary of State (see box).

Rescued. How Finch will fit into the tightly structured White House staff (TIME cover, June 8) remains to be seen. As he stood near the President, weary and crumpled, Finch hardly looked like someone who had just advanced professionally. Instead, he was a man who had been rescued and given safe haven—by the vessel that had rammed him in the first place. But he was still gamely loyal. "It's a higher calling," he quipped, "but a lower salary" (\$42,500 v. \$60,000 at HEW).

When the Administration took office, it seemed that Finch's troubles would be —like those of any HEW Secretary —financial and administrative, rather than political and ideological. HEW is a bureaucratic monster, with some 250 separate programs and a personnel roster of 107,000. Finch, given his pick of several Cabinet jobs, hesitated not at all on which to take: "HEW is where the action is."

Finch's critics were to argue later that he never quite mastered his sprawling empire. Continuing turmoil, particularly within the Health section, was a constant problem (see MEDICINE). But Finch brought to the job a determination to reform and modernize HEW. Though firmly positioned in the progressive wing of the G.O.P., he is also a Nixon team player. "Our theme is going to be pragmatism," he announced.

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Translated, that meant no quick requests for extra billions and grandiose new programs. It did mean innovative proposals like the welfare reform scheme, which finally became Administration policy after much internal debate and represented one of Finch's few victories.

First Intimation. From the beginning, Finch sought out like-minded progressives to be his ranking subordinates. Among them were Under Secretary John Veneman, Education Commissioner James Allen, and Leon Panetta, chief of the Civil Rights Office. Another nominee—Dr. John Knowles to be Assistant Secretary for Health and Scientific Affairs—produced the first public intimation of Finch's political problems. For months, the nomination remained in limbo because of opposition from the American Medical Association and a handful of conservatives in Congress. Nixon finally ruled last June in favor of the A.M.A.

Only a week later, Finch went through the wringer again, this time over school desegregation. Though publicly committed to ending segregation, the White House and Attorney General John Mitchell wanted to soften the process and thereby prove to Southerners that Washington understood their problems. Finch opposed any relaxation of pressure. The result was a joint proclamation, issued last July over Finch and Mitchell's names, which proved to be the first of a series of waffling pronouncements on the emotionally charged subject.

In a group of Mississippi cases, Finch was then compelled to argue for a delay in the desegregation deadline. The Supreme Court later blocked that maneuver, and even without constant judicial pressure the Administration is now going ahead with desegregation efforts. Nonetheless, Finch and HEW had been put in the position of fighting a rearguard action against conservatives in the White House and Justice Department on the school issue. In one skirmish, the White House forced Leon Panetta to resign.

Frustration. Compared with Mitchell and White House Aides Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, Finch was clearly losing access and influence by the middle of last year. Some of Nixon's aides were muttering that Finch had retained too many Democrats in HEW, that he could not control subordinates critical of the Administration.

Simultaneously, Finch was under pressure from his own staff and from HEW's constituency—the poor, the black, the young—to assert himself more vigorously. At a May meeting with 75 ranking aides, Finch had to defend his leadership against attack. Fatigued and depressed, he was to attend a mass meeting of protesting HEW staffers three weeks ago when he was suddenly hospitalized because an exhaustion-induced nerve ailment had numbed his arm. Reflecting on her father's attitude, Maureen Finch, 20, said last month: "I see the frustration growing. There just is no money for HEW to do the things he knows it should."

Diffident. Even some of Finch's friends began to wonder whether he was the best man for HEW, whether he could stand the strain. Though forceful and articulate in public appearances, Finch tends to be diffident in small meetings and face-to-face confrontations, where much of the infighting takes place. Recently he has been sleeping little, smoking and drinking a bit too much.

Haldeman, a fellow Californian and longtime friend, suggested to Nixon that Finch be brought into the White House. Nixon and Finch discussed the idea some weeks ago. Then, last Friday, just 24 hours before the announcement, the President called Finch into the Oval Office and again proposed the arrangement. Was it Finch's liberalism or his weakness in coping with administrative detail that finally caused him to be nudged aside? Both were factors. But to the end, Finch was prepared to stick it out. When Nixon summoned him last week, the Secretary was in the process of revising his schedule to allow more time for close supervision of his department. Another man might have quit the Administration altogether, but Finch has been too close to Nixon too long for that.

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