

Clinton Names UN Ambassador Richardson to Succeed Peña as Energy Secretary

After months of dawdling, President Clinton nominated Bill Richardson, the US ambassador to the United Nations for the past 16 months and before that a congressman from New Mexico for 14 years, as the next Secretary of Energy. Richardson has several qualifications for the post: He became one of Clinton's champions during the 1992 election campaign and, as a Washington insider with a cheerful and optimistic outlook on political life, he has reinforced his ties to a President beset with personal troubles; he is known on Capitol Hill for his mastery of the fine art of friendly persuasion rather than bluster or threats to win points, and, like his predecessor, Federico Peña, who resigned from the job at the end of June, he has politically correct Hispanic roots. Perhaps most important, though, Richardson is familiar with the Department of Energy (DOE), having represented the congressional district that includes two major DOE laboratories—Los Alamos and Sandia. Though a staunch Democrat, he also always found it pragmatic and politic to collaborate with the state's dominant Republican, Pete V. Domenici, who chairs the Senate's Budget Committee and the appropriations panel that controls DOE funding, to defend the labs from prospective budget cuts during the 1990s.

New Mexico's interests are likely to remain uppermost in DOE politics if Richardson's appointment is confirmed by the Senate. Richardson also has a personal agenda that includes higher office: He hasn't concealed his desire to be considered the party's choice as governor of the state or as the running mate of Vice President Al Gore, the Democrat's leading contender for the presidency in 2000. The UN post has enabled Richardson to become known nationally through his appearances on the TV talk show circuit.

His nickname in the House of Representatives was Bluto, after the beefy cartoon character who was Popeye's rival for Olive Oyl. Tom Downey, a former House member from Massachusetts, notes that Richardson was liked by lawmakers from both political parties for his indefatigable, unpretentious style.

After Clinton announced the appointment at a White House ceremony, Richardson spoke of the importance of science and technology for mopping up environmental gunk and cutting down energy use. He also championed the need to maintain a safe and reliable nuclear weapons stockpile as the best



RICHARDSON: An insider at Energy.

way of supporting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

While US envoys at the UN have usually been cautious and colorless diplomats, Richardson stood out as cheerful and courageous. He often had lunch at the staff cafeteria rather than the official dining room for UN delegates. After his "free-wheeling" years in Congress, Richardson found it difficult to speak and vote as an agent of the State Department and White House. At times he seemed constrained in UN debates and rarely strayed from carefully scripted "talking points" prepared in Washington.

He particularly cultivated a rapport with Russian Ambassador Sergei V. Lavrov. They arranged joint speaking engagements, socialized a bit, and, when Richardson invited the entire UN Security Council to a Yankees-Mets game last season, Lavrov got a seat next to him. While that personal relationship sometimes helped smooth over differences between the two countries, it didn't stop Lavrov from arguing against Richardson on the issue of how to deal with Iraq's refusal to cooperate fully with UN weapons inspectors.

Richardson's flair for foreign affairs was a main reason why Clinton picked him for the UN position over the objections of Madeleine Albright, the Secretary of State. Even while Richardson was in Congress, Clinton sent him to negotiate the release of American hostages held in Cuba, Iraq, Sudan and North Korea. For his successful efforts, Richardson was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. But Albright didn't always recognize his talents.

During a sensitive debate over Iraq, Albright dispatched the State Department's veteran diplomat, Thomas Pickering, who had been ambassador to Russia, to make the case at the UN.

In Congress in the early 1990s, Richardson had been sharply critical of DOE plans for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, the controversial underground low-level nuclear waste repository in his home state, and he worked to ensure stringent environmental standards for the project. Ironically, he is now likely to preside over the plant's early operations.

Richardson's nomination is virtually certain to be approved by the Senate, where his appointment needs to be confirmed. But he is likely to face some embarrassing questions about his minor role in the scandal involving former White House intern Monica Lewinsky, whom he offered a low-level UN job, which she turned down, and about the US's \$1.3 billion debt to the UN for dues and peacekeeping services—a matter that continues to cause deadlock in Congress and the Administration and could lead to the US losing its vote in the General Assembly. Richardson insists that his inability to resolve the issue of US arrears has been his biggest frustration at the UN. "The upshot of the dues problem," he says, "is the US loses its credibility, its clout and its moral stature among the nations of the world."

Before departing after his 15 months as Energy Secretary, Peña described the department's achievements at a farewell reception in the DOE's headquarters in the Forrestal Building. His list ranged from launching the Million Solar Roofs program, which has as its goal the installation of advances in solar technology, using semiconductors in shingles, in one million rooftops by 2010, to removing nuclear weapons materials from the Soviet Union and developing oil fields in the Caspian Sea region. "I look back at the accomplishments and then I look at those who want to abolish DOE and I wonder what in the world they're thinking." DOE is meeting many challenges, said Peña, and will have an "energetic leader" in Richardson.

Peña, by the way, told friends after leaving the department that he has joined Vestar Capital Partners, a New York investment house, as a senior adviser. He has moved back to Denver, where he was mayor before Clinton brought him to Washington to be secretary of transportation in the first term.

IRWIN GOODWIN