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By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28 — Elliot Richardson of Massachusetts is now on his way to London, by way of the Bahamas, to be the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James. In many ways, he is the most interesting figure on the American political scene today, maybe better qualified to be President in the last years of the seventies than most candidates now in the race, but obviously not even in the running.

Mr. Richardson is not all that important in himself, but he is a symbol of the question Lord Bryce and many others have asked for generations: Why do the most qualified men in America not seek public office or make it to the White House?

Most times, the answer to this is that party authority and party loyalty eliminate "outsiders" like Wendell Willkie, the Republican Presidential nominee against Roosevelt in 1940, but there is probably less party authority or party allegiance now than ever before in this century, yet qualified men like Mr. Richardson are not seriously considered.

It is not that Mr. Richardson feels inferior to the other candidates. Modesty is not his outstanding personal quality. He is a well-educated, pragmatic man, with a vision of the distractions of local politics and the ambiguities of national and world affairs. He may be a little too handsome and too Harvard for popular national appeal, but he is a superb lawyer and administrator and is just about the right age in his middle-fifties with just about the right record. He also has the right kind of Presidential presence to be a serious candidate in 1976.

Mr. Richardson has been around Washington for a long time. As a young man, he was clerk to Mr. Justice Frankfurter in the Supreme Court of the United States. After that, he had every opportunity to make an outstanding career here in Washington. But he recalled here just before he left for London that Archibald Cox, his associate in the Nixon "Saturday Night Massacre," said to him: "To make a career in Washington, you have to come from somewhere else; you have to have a home base." So he went back to Massachusetts but never did so well there politically as he has done in Washington.

In the last few years, Mr. Richardson has been the best Under Secretary of State since Sumner Welles; Secretary of Health Education and Welfare, Secretary of Defense, and Attorney General. Nobody in the history of the Republic has had so many important jobs for so short a time and not be

cause he handled them badly but because he did them all so well that he was pushed along into the next impossible vacancy.

The result is that Mr. Richardson has built a reputation here for intelligence and efficiency, but has started almost everything and finished nothing, always considered for some other job, always on the move, and maybe now, on his way to London, in the wrong direction.

He will undoubtedly be a good ambassador in Grosvenor Square. He is quiet, thoughtful and articulate. The English will like him, partially because he is so much more expressive and attractive than his predecessor, but also because he likes them, and he is very English himself. But his mission will take him out of the Presidential struggle of 1976.

He may come back to Washington before the end of the year as Secretary of State, if the present attacks on Henry Kissinger in the Congress, the

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universities, and the press continue; but even then, as a Republican, he will not be in a position to run for the Presidency.

Before he left Washington the other day for London, he said that he would get into the primary elections of 1976 if President Ford decided not to run. He added that he thought he would do "very well" in the primaries, that he wasn't as austere or "stiff" as most people thought, that he had run more than a million votes ahead of Barry Goldwater in Massachusetts in 1964, but that there was no point in talking about his political future, for obviously the President would be a candidate and could not be challenged by anybody.

In short, Mr. Richardson, for all his talents and ambitions and possibilities, is a man of the Republican establishment. He is not like Jack Kennedy, out of the combative Irish in Massachusetts, who felt that the Kennedys could knock over the party's organization. Richardson is a "regular" and will go along, taking and doing whatever job is available, like most other prominent members of his party.

The result is that we are probably going to be stuck with the old and traditional candidates of both parties in 1976: Ford, Rockefeller and Reagan on the Republican side; Jackson, Humphrey and Muskie on the Democratic side, all in their 60's. For the political nominating system is stacked against outsiders like Richardson, and most of them would rather join the system in London than fight it with little chance