

Concentration Camp Switch

Box 12/7/69
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and Robert Novak

THE LONG overdue decision, announced last Wednesday, to back repeal of the concentration camp provision in the 1950 Internal Security Act was reached only after quiet pressure from the White House overcame stubborn resistance by Attorney General John N. Mitchell.

The question that had been simmering inside the administration all year came to a boil in an extraordinary secret meeting in Mitchell's office Oct. 23. On that day, while Justice Department attorneys were vainly arguing before the Supreme Court for delay in the Mississippi school desegregation cases, Mitchell spent three hours in a confrontation with Negro leaders.

One of the key issues they raised was Title II of the Internal Security Act, which permits the government to establish detention camps for use in internal security emergencies.

Originally passed at the height of the Joseph R. McCarthy era Communist scare, this provision has never been used and camps originally established to detain suspected subversives have long since been closed. But rumors started sweeping urban ghettos in early 1966 that the federal government was planning to use Title II authority to lock up black militants.

ONE REASON the rumors persisted was the refusal by the Justice Department to take a stand on bills introduced in Congress to repeal Title II. Indeed, at one point, the Justice Department—reflecting Mitchell's position—decided tentatively but not publicly to oppose repeal on grounds that Title II might be needed in a national emergency.

Thus, the Negroes in Mitchell's office on Oct. 23 were deeply concerned. Among those present were Coretta King, widow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Ralph David Abernathy, Dr. King's successor; Mayor Richard Hatcher of Gary, Ind., and

Wednesday in a letter to Chairman James O. Eastland (D-Miss.) of the Senate Judiciary Committee (who favors repeal, but as a trade-off to liberals for a new, tough internal security law).

Rep. John Conyers of Detroit.

Representing the White House was Leonard Garment, President Nixon's top adviser on minority affairs. Garment had been subtly lobbying for repeal of Title II from his White House office with the help of John E. Erlichman.

After airing grievances against the administration's position to extend the Voting Rights Act beyond the South and deteriorating relations between big city police departments and black ghettos, Mitchell's visitors pulled no punches in asking administration backing for repeal of Title II.

With congressional liberals pushing hard for the same thing, Mitchell agreed to consider it—but left the final decision up to Deputy Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, who was not present. Kleindienst read the minutes of the Oct. 23 meeting and—six weeks later—rendered his decision. He announced it last