

Aide Says Ford Knew of Alleged Korean Bribery and Ordered Inquiry

By RICHARD HALLORAN

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 23—Former President Ford was personally informed in 1975 that United States Congressmen were suspected of having taken South Korean bribes and he ordered an investigation by the Justice Department.

The former President acknowledged, in responding to an inquiry by The New York Times made through an aide at his home in California, that Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger came to him in the fall of 1975 with intelligence reports alleging that four or five Congressmen had accepted Korean payments.

Mr. Ford is the highest American official known to have been aware of the Korean operation. That the President himself was apprised of alleged bribery, which was not known before, underscores the sensitivity then attached to the possible political and diplomatic consequences of the allegations.

Dr. Kissinger has previously acknowledged that he had been aware of Korean lobbying in Washington as far back as the early 1970's, when he was special assistant to the President for national security affairs. But he has said that he had not known about anything illegal until 1975.

Others Knew of Lobbying

Former Secretary of State William P. Rogers and former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird also have said that they had known of South Korean lobbying, particularly on trying to alter plans for the withdrawal of troops from Korea, but that they had no knowledge of any illegals.

Former aides to Mr. Ford said that when told of the allegations he seemed surprised and said that he had not heard of such matters while he was Vice President or Minority Leader in the House of Representatives. Mr. Ford is known to have been entertained by Tongsun Park, the Korean businessman who was allegedly Seoul's political agent, and to have been a member of Mr. Park's George Town Club here.

There is some dispute on the speed with which the Justice Department reacted to the Presidential order to investigate. Former officials in the Ford Administration said that they had begun immediate, careful inquiry, working their way through a thicket of legal and diplomatic puzzles. But officials of the Carter Administration maintain that the inquiry did not really get going until they took office a year ago.

The sequence that led to Mr. Ford began in the spring of 1975, according to former officials, when the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Philip C. Habib, received intelligence reports naming four or five Congressmen as having taken Korean bribes.

Fears Ailer Fall of Vietnam

Who the Congressmen were and other details of the reported 1975 allegations

could not be learned. That year was especially active for the Korean lobbying operation because of fears in Seoul that the United States might abandon Korea after the fall of South Vietnam to Communist control that spring.

Mr. Habib, who is now the Undersecretary of State, had been preoccupied with the situation in Vietnam and it said to have waited until the summer to inform Dr. Kissinger, by then the Secretary of State, about the reported bribery. Having been ambassador to Korea, before returning to Washington, Mr. Habib was reportedly well aware of the South Korean effort to influence Congressmen. He has consistently declined to discuss his role in the episode.

Dr. Kissinger in turn reported the alleged bribery to President Ford in the fall of 1975, probably in October, the former officials said. Mr. Ford, an aide said, then ordered the matter turned over to the Justice Department. The State Department also turned over its files on the matter to the Justice Department at that time.

Earlier reports held that Mr. Habib requested the Justice Department to investigate after a Senate subcommittee asked for the State Department's files for its investigation into the Gulf Oil Corporation's political contributions to South Korea's ruling party. Mr. Habib was said to have told Senate investigators that the question was "very sensitive."

Orders from Attorney General

In any event, the former Assistant Attorney General in charge of the criminal division, Richard Thornburgh, said that he had received his orders to investigate from Attorney General Edward H. Levi in late 1975. Reached by telephone at his law office in Pittsburgh, Mr. Thornburgh said that he had given the task to the department's public integrity section in early 1976.

Mr. Thornburgh asserted that his staff had undertaken a "carefully structured" investigation put together "brick by brick."

He declined to discuss diplomatic considerations that may have slowed the investigation. But they evidently included the Ford Administration's concern that the United States' security relationship with South Korea not be jeopardized.

Mr. Thornburgh said that the inquiries of his staff had been preliminary to presenting a case to the grand jury, which he said began in June 1976. More manpower was added in the fall of 1976 he said, and late in that year the Justice Department brought in the Internal Revenue Service, the Securities and Exchange Commission and other agencies.

Press Reports Surfaced

It was in that period that press reports about the Korean lobby and the Justice Department investigation surfaced.

The present Attorney General, Griffin B. Bell, and the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the criminal division, Benjamin R. Civiletti, have given a somewhat different version and suggested that the serious investigation began only after they took office in January 1977.

Mr. Bell has said that when he assumed his post, "I found we had one lawyer working on the case." He asserted that he had assigned five lawyers, 12 Federal Bureau of Investigation agents and 12 Internal Revenue Service agents to the investigation, "and we have been moving along."

Mr. Civiletti, in a meeting with Congressmen last summer, said that the Justice Department's investigation did not begin until July 1976 and that it was pursued in a preliminary way until October of that year, taking about half of one lawyer's time.

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