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Federal Judge in Agnew Case No-Nonsense, 'Practical Man'

By Bill Richards

Washington Post Staff Writer

When feeling ran high in Virginia in the late 1950s over federal court decisions upholding school desegregation, U.S. District Court Judge Walter E. Hoffman began getting threatening phone calls from strangers and the silent treatment from some friends.

Hoffman's reaction then was to disconnect his phone and tell reporters "I'd rather do my duty if it costs me my last friend."

The tough-talking 64-year-old jurist is certain to face one of the stiffest tests in his long legal career in the coming weeks as he decides the crucial question of whether Vice President Spiro T. Agnew can be indicted by a grand jury before first being impeached and removed by Congress.

Hoffman, who was the unanimous choice of the seven Maryland federal judges who all disqualified themselves from the case last month because of various relationships with Agnew, is known in Virginia's eastern judicial district as a no-nonsense judge who runs his courtroom with iron discipline.

Critics of the tall, heavy-set judge claim that he is occasionally overly outspoken in his opinions.

During courtroom clashes over the desegregation of Norfolk's schools in the wake of the Supreme Courts 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregation ruling Hoffman consistently ruled in favor of the integrationists but made it clear that his personal sympathies did not always lie with their cause.

"His strong point," explained one of his judicial colleagues recently after Hoffman was appointed by Chief Judge Clement F. Haynsworth of the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals to handle the proceedings relating to allegations of corrup-

tion against the Vice President, "is that he's a damn strong practical man who won't let this thing turn into a donnybrook."

Hoffman's seniority in Virginia's eastern judicial district and his reputation for running a tight courtroom have made him somewhat feared by new lawyers trying their first cases before him.

In 1969 when he was sent to San Francisco to fill in there on an armed robbery case he promptly held the mother of the defendant in contempt when she lit a cigarette in court. The next day he placed the two defense attorneys in contempt for showing up 20 minutes late for a 9 a.m. court session.

Since he was appointed to the federal bench in 1954 by President Eisenhower, Hoffman also has gained the reputation of being an extremely hard worker. He often comes in before 9 a.m. and stays in his chambers on the third floor of the federal courthouse in Norfolk until 7 or 8 p.m. occasionally also working Sundays.

The federal appointment, which came after Hoffman, a Republican, lost a race for attorney general of Virginia, caused him to give up one of his favorite part-time occupations, refereeing foot-



WALTER E. HOFFMAN

... brooks no nonsense

ball games in the Southern Conference.

A former lineman on the University of Pennsylvania's football squad in the late 1920s, Hoffman still is an avid football fan. His decisions on the football field have occasionally been unpopular.

Once, after calling back an 85-yard run by a University of Tennessee halfback in 1948 on a clipping penalty, he had to be escorted off the field under guard to keep away enraged Tennes-

see fans. Game films later showed that his call was accurate.

Hoffman's football background and his size have caused him to be nicknamed "Beef" by his friends. He no longer referees football but he still plays on occasion, a strong game of golf.

After his first wife Evelyn died of cancer in 1971, Hoffman married an old family friend. He and his wife, Helen, live in Norfolk near his daughter, Carole Hancock, 33. Hoffman's son Walter E. Hoffman Jr., 28, is a real estate broker in nearby Virginia Beach.

Hoffman, who received his law degree from Washington and Lee University, is considered an able legal scholar who occasionally gives seminars to fellow jurists on the fine points of sentencing.

Since his designation by Haynsworth to handle the Agnew case he has refused to give any interviews or answer questions from reporters concerning the case.

Privately, he has indicated that he plans to rule speedily on the grand jury challenge by Agnew's lawyers. No matter what he does, his ruling in the case is almost certain to wind up before the U.S. Supreme Court for a final decision.