

Agnew Urged by Advisers To Repudiate Watergate

Political Harm for '76 Drive Feared— Connally and Godwin Are Reported Reassessing Plans to Join G.O.P.

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WASHINGTON, April 21 — Advisers of Vice President Agnew are urging him to disassociate himself from the Watergate affair "in the most direct kind of way" to avoid what they see as a harmful political impact reaching to the 1976 Presidential election.

After dismissing the political significance of the Watergate case for nearly 10 months, many of those whose careers are tied to the Republican party are reacting nervously to the issue, which is developing into a national concern.

For the Vice President, that reaction includes consideration of a bold move to keep himself clear of the expected political fallout. According to a source close to the Vice President and familiar with strategy planning for a Presidential campaign in 1976, the matter presents an immediate problem.

"The Vice President and every other Republican is in a difficult position because of this," the source said. "It has got to be repudiated. It can be done. Spiro Agnew can do it because of his reputation for

integrity; but to do that he's got to virtually move out on his own in a most direct kind of way and when asked about the President and Watergate, he'll have to say, 'I repudiate the whole affair.'"

"But," the source asked in obvious consternation, "How do you go ahead and say what has to be said and maintain a posture . . . still not look like it is an act of disloyalty?"

Indications of Concern

Indications of the growing national concern include the following:

¶The latest Gallup Poll shows that nearly one-third of those interviewed believe the Watergate affair reveals corruption in the Nixon organization, leading the Gallup organization to conclude that the issue could have a serious effect on Republican Congressional races next year.

¶A former Democratic of Virginia, Mills F. Godwin, has decided to "reassess" an earlier decision to accept the Republican nomination, if it is offered

Continued on Page 25, Column 4

paigned. His last major statement on Watergate was made in October when he said that "a calculated attempt to prove corruption on the part of the Administration has fallen flat as a pancake in the eyes of the American people."

"We've seen it tried from every angle," Mr. Agnew continued, "and yet there is nothing but smoke. We haven't seen a bit of fire yet, and I'm not sure there's going to be any fire."

Now, however, Mr. Agnew's advisers are alarmed at the potential of Watergate to undermine his personal political plans. The immediate problem, according to those dealing with the matter, is damage to carefully cultivated issues at the heart of the Vice President's political future—the issues of law and order and challenges to the responsibility of the news media.

"How do you run on law and order with this issue behind you?" an Agnew adviser asked rhetorically. "The media issue is in trouble too because you condemn an irresponsible press and immediately the response will come: 'Well, if it hadn't been for The Washington Post we'd never have known about Watergate.'"

The fear of possible damage from the issue by these Agnew advisers appears to be supported this week by findings of the latest Gallup poll, which was taken between April 6 and 9, before President Nixon indicated publicly there was more

to the affair than earlier admitted and before former Attorney General John N. Mitchell conceded prior knowledge of attempts to plan bugging of the Democrats. In a sampling of 1,528 adults, the Gallup poll developed the following major conclusions:

¶A majority (52 per cent) described the affair as "just politics," but nearly one-third (31 per cent) thought it was a serious matter because it revealed corruption in the Nixon Administration.

¶Four out of ten of those polled (41 per cent) believed that President Nixon had advance knowledge of the Watergate situation while 32 per cent did not. Politically significant in that sample is the fact that 42 per cent who described themselves as independents believed the President had prior knowledge.

A large increase was reported in the number of people familiar with Watergate. During last year's campaign, only 53 per cent said they had even heard of the matter but the recent sample found familiarity among 83 per cent, a figure described by Gallup as "extraordinary" even considering the amount of attention devoted to the affair by the news media.

"The issue," the Gallup organization concluded, "has become of such widespread concern that it could seriously affect G.O.P. fortunes in the next year's Congressional races."

Many leading party members

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

at the June convention, to replace Gov. Linwood Holton, a Republican, who cannot succeed himself.

¶Reports by sources close to John B. Connally, formerly Democratic Governor of Texas, say that he, too, is reassessing plans to switch his party affiliation as a result of Watergate.

No Comment This Year

Although it is not known whether Mr. Agnew will act on advice that he move out on his own on the issue, he has not made a public statement on the matter since the 1972 cam-

needed no poll to reach the same conclusion. On April 11, Anne Armstrong, counselor to President Nixon, expressed fear that the Republican party was being hurt nationally by adverse exposure on the issue. She made the statement in support of one by Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, who had described Watergate as a "dagger in the heart" of the Republican party that could prove costly at the polls in 1974.

All members of the House of Representatives are up for re-election next year as well as 12 Republican Senators. In an informal Associated Press poll on April 14, every Republican Senator expressed concern that the issue would hurt the party in those campaigns.

Apparently the party's attraction as a channel for future ambitions for some conservative Democrats has also been weakened.

Sources close to Mr. Connally reported that he was "reconsidering" a decision reached earlier to switch his party affiliation. Mr. Connolly, who served as President Nixon's Treasury Secretary and who organized Democrats for the President's Re-election campaign last year, could not be reached for comment.

One high-ranking Republican party official in Texas had told friends privately that Mr. Connally would make his announcement of his party switch by April 12. Yesterday, however,

a source who knows the former Governor well said there was "no question he has cooled off, or at least delayed" his announcement largely because of the way the Watergate incident has developed.

A similar reaction by Mr. Godwin, who worked for the President's re-election last year, had announced on March 5 that he would accept the Republican nomination.

As the Watergate affair grew more ominous, however, Mr. Godwin began to pull back. He will have to reassess that decision, he now says, if the political fallout from Watergate intensifies and if "it appears to be having a strongly adverse effect on the Virginia political situation."