

Pressure on U.S. Parole Board Laid to Mitchell and Kleindienst

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WASHINGTON, April 14—A former member of the United States Board of Parole charged today that two top Justice Department officials — John N. Mitchell and Richard G. Kleindienst—had put pressure on the board to grant a parole to a former member of Congress.

The charge was made by Mrs. Charlotte P. Reese, who served on the board from 1964 to 1970, in testimony before a House Judiciary subcommittee considering reform of the parole system.

Mrs. Reese testified she had been told that in 1970 Mr. Mitchell, then Attorney General, and Mr. Kleindienst, then Deputy Attorney General, put pressure on the board chairman, George J. Reed, to grant a parole to Thomas F. Johnson, a former Democratic Representative from Maryland who was serving a six-month jail sentence on a conflict-of-interest charge.

Mr. Reed said today, "There has never been any attempt by the Attorney General or the Deputy Attorney General to influence decisions of the board. I have, of course, had numerous occasions to talk to the Attorney General and the Deputy Attorney General. In none of these conversations, including the phone call that Mrs. Reese referred to in her testimony, was there any effort to influence any decision of the board in any way."

Convicted at Second Trial

Johnson, who served in Congress from 1959 to 1963, was convicted in June, 1963, along with former Representative Frank W. Boykin, Democrat of Alabama, on charges of conspiracy and conflict of interest in urging the Justice Department to review a mail fraud indictment against two officials of a Maryland savings and loan association. Boykin was pardoned by President Johnson in December, 1965.

On appeal, former Representative Johnson's conviction for conspiracy was reversed. On retrial, however, he was convicted a second time on conflict-of-interest charges of receiving \$17,500 to persuade the Justice Department to drop the mail fraud case. He began serving a six-month sentence in April, 1970, and was released on parole from the United States Medical Center in Springfield, Mo., in August that year.

Mrs. Reese testified she had

been told that while the Johnson parole application was being considered by the board, "the meeting was interrupted by a telephone call to the chairman." She continued:

"Between the call and the recess for lunch, it was noticeable that the chairman was trying to postpone the vote. At lunch together, board members learned why.

"The call had come from 'Main Justice,' the chairman said, where both the Attorney General and his deputy wanted the Congressman to be released. His health was poor, they had pointed out, and besides, another man involved in the same case had received a pardon from President Johnson. Mr. Reed explained that he had not passed along the message during the meeting because he didn't want to mention it in front of the staff director, who had been present that morning, as usual, to take notes."

Mrs. Reese did not specify from whom the call had come in "Main Justice"—the term used within the board to describe the Justice Department.

After a "long and bitter" argument that afternoon, she said, the board voted 4 to 3 to grant the parole. In granting the parole, she said, the board "violated" its "long respected rule" that the chairman would make every effort to reach any absent member to allow a vote to be cast.

Mrs. Reese was ill at home but said that she was never called by the chairman. Had she voted, she said, she would have voted against the parole, thus producing a tie, rejecting the parole application.

Silent on Her Source

After the hearing, Mrs. Reese, who is writing a book on the parole system, declined to disclose to reporters the source of her information about the board meeting on the ground that it could lead to "retribution" by the Justice Department against individuals still on the board.

Mrs. Reese cited the Johnson parole case as an example of how she contended the Parole Board under the Nixon Administration was being stripped of its independent status and made to conform to the Justice Department's "get tough" attitude on criminal law.

Administratively, the board, composed of eight Presidential appointees, is within the Justice Department.