

Agnew Pressure For U.S. Contracts



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VICE PRESIDENT Spiro Agnew has twice pressured a small federal agency to give handsome no-bid contracts to a Maryland company run by an old friend and political campaign contributor.

The lucky company was Maps, Inc., of Baltimore, which does aerial photography and related mapping. Until his death in January, 1971, its president was Thomas Collins, who had been a member of the Baltimore county Personnel and Salary Board while Agnew was the country's chief executive.

A few months after Agnew became vice president, Collins began to seek a \$121,900 air map contract with the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), a housing and planning agency in Washington. Aware of his old friend's new power in Washington, Collins called Agnew.

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AGNEW had an aide call RLA and the agency awarded the contract to Maps, Inc. One competitor protested loudly to RLA that political pressure had been exerted, but the complaint was ignored.

In 1971, RLA was preparing to award another mapping contract and the agency's executive director, Melvin Mister, got an unusual letter from Agnew's administrative assistant, Arthur Sohmer.

"Two years ago," Sohmer reminded Mister, "this office contacted you on be-

half of Maps, Inc., a Baltimore firm, which had expressed an interest in doing topography mapping for your agency."

The vice presidential message went on to praise Maps, Inc., at some length; then added pointedly: "Any consideration that you might be able to give to their interest would be appreciated by this office."

Sure enough, on September 24, exactly a month after the Agnew letter, Maps, Inc., got a fat \$158,600 contract from RLA.

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AT RLA, a spokesman said Maps, Inc., "did a good job on both contracts" — which our study of the files tends to confirm. The spokesman said: "It was a validly awarded contract. The contacts (by Agnew's office) had no effect."

As to the propriety of a vice president using his office to pressure a federal agency on behalf of a former crony, the RLA said, "We treated it like any other communication about a constituent."

At Agnew's office, Sohmer refused to speak to us, but a spokesman said, "We regard this very much in the nature of a routine referral. No pressure at all was intended."

In fact, such referrals are "routine" only for congressmen. When they come from the White House or vice president, they have all the earmarks of a direct order.