

Agnew Rebuked for Attack on Probe Aide

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Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson rebuked Vice President Agnew last evening for attacking "a career public servant" who cannot defend himself.

Richardson made the rejoinder in a short statement prompted by the Vice President's televised attack in Los Angeles on top Justice Department officials over their handling of the criminal investigation of Agnew's activities.

The Vice President directed his harshest words at Assistant Attorney General Henry E. Petersen, head of the Justice Department's criminal division.

Petersen remained silent.

Richardson praised Petersen as "a distinguished government lawyer who has had more than two decades of prosecutorial experience and is greatly respected by his colleagues in law enforcement."

Agnew had charged that Petersen, head of the Justice Department's criminal division, was one of the Department's officials "trying to recoup their reputation at my expense. I'm a big trophy."

While Agnew did not mention Petersen by name, the Vice President's references to a "high career" official in the Justice Department and a prosecutor originally responsible for handling the Watergate investigation, left no doubt that he was referring to Petersen.

Agnew charged that federal prosecutors had abused him because they had been "severely stung" by their "ineptness" in handling of the Watergate case.

Richardson later released a brief statement in which he took full responsibility for the Justice Department's conduct in Agnew's case.

Agnew's assertion in yesterday's speech that the Wall Street Journal obtained a copy of the Justice Department letter informing him he was under investigation was disputed yesterday by a spokesman for the newspaper.

Norman C. Miller, Washington bureau chief of the Wall Street Journal, said in a telephone interview, "The Vice President is in error. Our original story disclosing the investigation was not based on the letter Mr. Agnew referred to in the speech." Miller added that his newspaper did not have a copy of the letter to

Agnew before the Vice President did.

The letter from U.S. Attorney George Beall informing Agnew he was under investigation was dated Aug. 1, 1973, and hand-delivered to one of Agnew's attorneys, Judah Best, on Aug. 2.

The Journal's original article, written by Jerry Landauer, reporting that Agnew had been notified by the Justice Department that he was under investigation was dated Aug. 7, the same day this newspaper carried a similar article.

The Journal's article went to print on the evening of Aug. 6 about the same time

that Agnew's office released a terse statement from Agnew saying, "I have been informed I am under investigation for possible violations of the criminal statutes. I will make no further comment until the investigation is completed, other than to say that I am innocent of any wrongdoing, that I have confidence in the criminal justice system of the United States and that I am equally confident that my innocence will be affirmed."

Thus, the first news reports of Beall's letter to Agnew did not appear for more than four days after he actually received the letter and came at the time of the Vice President's own announcement.