

Tight Court

A Tough Judge On Agnew Case

By Bill Richards
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When feeling ran high in Virginia in the late 1950s over federal court decisions upholding school desegregation, U.S. District 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 unless he is first impeached and removed by Congress.

CHOICE

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 disci-



WALTER HOFFMAN
A strong jurist

pline.

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 Court's 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," said one of his judicial colleagues recently after Hoffman was

appointed by Chief Judge Clement F. Haynsworth of the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit to handle the proceedings relating to allegations of corruption 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.

CONTEMPT

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 25 minutes late for a 9 a.m. court session.

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.