

President Reportedly Took Initiative on Agnew Talks

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 11—President Nixon reportedly initiated the secret legal negotiations that led yesterday to the sudden resignation of Spiro T. Agnew from the Vice Presidency and his dramatic conviction on a charge of Federal income tax evasion.

Authoritative Government officials said today that Mr. Nixon had prompted the first

Transcript of news conference is printed on Pages 26, 27.

bargaining toward an agreement under which Mr. Agnew surrendered his office and pleaded no contest to the tax charge in exchange for a \$10,000 fine and probation rather than imprisonment.

Meanwhile, sources close to Mr. Agnew said today that, as early as Sept. 13, he had informed the Justice Department through his lawyers that he

was prepared to resign in return for an end of the Government's criminal prosecution of him.

As the President and Congress explored the options and avenues to be followed in choosing a successor to Mr. Agnew, Attorney General Elliott L. Richardson appealed over national television for public approval of the settlement that he said had avoided "a prolonged and potentially disastrous period of anguish and uncertainty."

At a news conference in the Great Hall at the Department of Justice, Mr. Richardson declared that the Government's "tenacious" investigation and public disclosure of allegations against an incumbent Vice President should serve to dispel an atmosphere of "cover-up" created by the Watergate scandal

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and to restore "confidence that our system works."

He defended the arrangement that enabled Mr. Agnew to avoid imprisonment—although acknowledging that George Beall, the United States attorney, and other Government prosecutors in Baltimore had sought a stiffer punishment.

The Attorney General said that resignation from the nation's second-highest elective office and public acceptance of a felony conviction represented penalties of "historic magnitude." He urged "compassion" for Mr. Agnew and said that he hoped Maryland officials would refrain from additional criminal action against Mr. Agnew in the state courts.

Effects Expected to Linger

It seemed likely, nonetheless, that the governmental and personal trauma of Mr. Agnew's resignation would not subside quickly, as the following developments today suggested:

Mr. Nixon solicited suggestions on a Vice-Presidential nominee from a wide assortment of political and civic figures. Melvin R. Laird, counselor to the President, said that Mr. Nixon hoped to "move rapidly" on submitting a nomination to Congress.

Officials on Capitol Hill, where both houses of Congress must confirm the nominee by majority vote, wrestled with technical details of the uncharted process and wrangled over the issue of whether the successor should be a caretaker or a potential Republican Presidential candidate.

Until he appeared in a Baltimore courtroom yesterday before United States District Judge Walter E. Hoffman to accept the negotiated-plea bargain, Mr. Agnew had steadfastly denounced the Justice Department investigation, asserted his innocence of all charges and pledged to continue fighting them from his high office even if indicted. But Mr. Richardson confirmed

that negotiations had begun in September and said that "the first [telephone] call I had was a call from the President's counsel, asking if I would be willing to meet with counsel for the Vice President."

Subsequently, in reply to a question, the Attorney General said that the request had been made by J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., Mr. Nixon's special White House counsel on Watergate matters.

'Facilitating Communications'

Mr. Richardson said, and a White House spokesman reiterated later, that Mr. Buzhardt's role had been limited to one of "facilitating communications" between the prosecutors and defense lawyers. Mr. Buzhardt did not reply to a request for a telephone interview.

Government sources knowledgeable about the Agnew case said, however, that Mr. Buzhardt had undertaken the middleman's role at the request of President Nixon.

As one senior official stated it, Mr. Buzhardt "couldn't do that without the full cognizance, support and direction of the President."

At the same time, some of these officials suggested the possibility that Mr. Nixon had prompted the out-of-court settlement in response to a plea by Mr. Agnew.

Whatever the cause of the White House intervention in the case, it appeared to explain the conflict in the assertions by Mr. Richardson today and by Mr. Agnew two weeks ago that neither had been responsible for starting the plea bargaining.

Explains Conflict

The Attorney General said that the negotiations had broken off in September but resumed by telephone last Saturday—one day after Mr. Agnew was said by associates to have decided against subjecting himself and the nation to a prolonged constitutional dispute—and completed Tuesday in deliberations joined by Judge Hoffman.

Mr. Richardson explained that the Government had agreed to limit the formal charges against Mr. Agnew to one income tax evasion count because "the very essence of a negotiated plea is that each side yields something."

The Attorney General said that part of the agreement had been stipulation that the Government would make public the evidence it had gathered against Mr. Agnew. He said that the Justice Department had believed it essential to enable the public to "judge the basis on which this matter has been handled."

Testimony on Kickbacks

He said at one point that the Government did not contend that the 40-page summary of the accusations was equivalent to an indictment. But he defended its publication by saying that to have kept it confidential would have led to in-

evitable efforts to "dig it out" and that "the result would have been an open ulcer on the body politic."

Mr. Richardson's comments today, which he described as an attempt to "clarify matters," appeared to open one subject of dispute involving the President's knowledge of the alleged misdeeds of Mr. Agnew.

President Nixon has stated several times—as recently as eight days ago, at a White House news conference—that none of the allegations against Mr. Agnew bore on his activities as Vice President.

The Justice Department account of the evidence cited, however, sworn testimony that Mr. Agnew had received kickbacks from Maryland contractors on a regular basis until last December, when Mr. Agnew's activities first came under investigation.