

Connally Could Have Been President

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and Les Whitten

For the first time, it is now possible to trace the strange twists of history that put Gerald Ford in the White House.

If former Vice President Spiro Agnew hadn't been caught taking petty bribes from Maryland contractors, he would be President today.

If former Treasury Secretary John Connally hadn't become ensnarled in the milk scandal, he would have been named as Agnew's replacement and would now be sitting in the Oval Office in Gerald Ford's place.

We have obtained the amazing, behind-the-scenes story from sources close to both Agnew and former President Nixon. We have spoken, for example, with Charles Colson, who was the intermediary between Nixon and Agnew. We have also had access to the page proofs of Colson's unpublished book, "Born Again," which discusses Agnew's downfall.

As Agnew's friends relate the story, the then-Vice President learned in early 1972 that Nixon wanted to replace him on the presidential ticket with Connally.

Colson got the same impression from the President, -t Connally was "one guy who could take over my job." The two men became so close that, after Connally's departure from government to recoup his finances, Nixon quietly intervened to help him with

some oil deals in the Middle East, Colson recalls.

But Agnew had a strong, stubborn following among conservative Republicans. To replace him with a lifelong Democrat, Nixon feared, would cause a Republican rebellion. "Could I appoint a Democrat?" Nixon asked Colson. Then, answering his own question, the President said: "No, I can't do it."

Less than a week after their Nov. 7, 1972, re-election, Nixon summoned Agnew to the presidential retreat at Camp David, Md. Apparently, Agnew thought he was being invited for a celebration; he was unprepared for the brutal session that followed.

The President informed him bluntly that the White House staff would exercise tighter control over his operation. His budget would be cut and his activities curtailed, Agnew was told. In short, the triumphant Nixon served notice that he intended to keep his Vice President on a short leash.

Afterward, the President confided to an aide: "I was really surprised at the way Agnew buckled under. I would never have taken that." Agnew returned from Camp David with a new impression also of Nixon. "He is the coldest fish I ever met," Agnew remarked to a friend.

True to his word, Nixon clamped down on the Vice President, who was treated thereafter like a minor functionary. He was told whom to fire and whom to keep on his staff. The humiliated Agnew

was even obliged to ask a Nixon aide, Alexander Haig, for transportation and other perquisites.

The Vice President also had to clear his overseas travel with Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger. Once Agnew wanted to visit his ancestral home in Greece, but Kissinger refused permission.

It was February, 1973, that Agnew first got wind that a federal grand jury was investigating him. He suspected immediately that Nixon was behind it. As Agnew confided darkly to friends, he expected Nixon to use the threat of indictment to blackmail him into giving up the vice presidency to Connally.

Colson insists that President Nixon had no such plot in mind, although he ended up trying to push Agnew out and to bring Connally in. Colson claims that the President never instigated the Agnew investigation and, in a fact, never even learned about it until April, 1973.

Nixon's first reaction was to come to Agnew's aid simply to spare his administration from further embarrassment. On April 13, 1973, he asked Colson, who had left the White House to practice law, to help Agnew.

Not until September, according to Colson, did he get a suggestion from the White House that Agnew should resign.

The President warned Colson: "There is no way Agnew can escape indictment. It is time for him to make a deal."

The removal of Agnew, Nixon indicated to Colson, would take some of the heat off himself from Watergate. Colson contended, on the contrary, that a crippled Vice President would be his best insurance against impeachment.

On Sept. 23, Nixon was back on the phone to Colson. "God," said the President, "how I wish it would all go away, but Ted (Agnew) doesn't understand the problem. He has got the best deal he can ever make. It is all boiled down to one income tax problem."

Colson said his client was worried about going to prison. "He should have no fear about that," assured Nixon. "That can be taken care of."

For the first time, Colson put the proposition straight to Agnew on Sept. 24. He had no support in the White House; his situation was deteriorating fast; maybe it was time to make a deal.

Agnew angrily rejected the idea. "I am innocent," he swore. "I am going to stick it out. I don't give a damn. I was elected just like the President was." But Agnew's attempts to force a showdown on Capitol Hill, according to Colson, were undercut by the White House itself.

The President still had Connally in mind as Agnew's replacement, said Colson, until Connally came under investigation for allegedly taking a bribe from dairymen. In desperation, Nixon turned to Gerald Ford to be his new Vice President.