

## Washington Insight



# No Fix For Agnew

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**A** MIASMIC FOG of leaks and rumors has obscured the matter of who stands where in the Agnew affair. So it seems useful to set out the basic roles — the more so as an unexpected denouement may emerge.

The White House, as usual, has been trying to shove trouble under the rug. The Vice President, naturally, has wanted the best break he can get. But the Justice Department — thanks chiefly to a Watergate-burned assistant attorney general, Henry Petersen — has been refusing to be party to any fix.

The White House may not have started the rumors of an early resignation by Agnew. But once the word was out, President Nixon's men made abundantly clear the President's interest in unloading the Vice President at the earliest opportunity.

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**T**HE REASON for this unseemly haste is twofold. For one thing, Agnew is a current embarrassment whose troubles underscore and redouble the Watergate difficulties.

Moreover, with Agnew out, the President would have a chance to designate his successor. That is important to Mr. Nixon because he would be extremely vulnerable if a Democratic administration took over in 1976. Even a mildly energetic Democratic attorney general would probably find, in the dozens of scandals growing out of Watergate, a field day for prosecution.

So, far more than most presidents, Mr. Nixon has a positive interest in having as the next president a Republican deeply in his debt. That is why he is not only pushing the Vice President to get out, but

smoothing the path for John Connally to come in. For Connally would owe almost everything to Mr. Nixon, and he could be counted on to turn a blind eye to the wrongs of the present administration.

Agnew's lawyers early blocked out a complicated defense against the charge of accepting bribes and favors. At the heart of the defense was the unresolved constitutional argument that the Vice President had to be impeached before he could be indicted. That defense posed formidable issues, and it would at least eat up lots of time.

But Agnew was apparently not comfortable with resting his case on such technicalities. Accordingly, his lawyers began talking to the Justice Department about possible arrangements whereby he might give up his legal claims and leave his office in return for concessions by the prosecution.

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**T**HE JUSTICE Department, however, took a stony attitude. Attorney General Elliott Richardson let the case against various Maryland politicians including Agnew build slowly in Baltimore.

Behind this screen there went forward bargaining between the Agnew lawyers and the Justice Department. The key man was Assistant Attorney General Petersen — a tough prosecutor with a strong sense of right and wrong.

Petersen has been unwilling to go easy on prosecution, even in exchange for a resignation. For once, despite the interest of the President and the Vice President and the administration, the fix was not automatically put in.