

'Let It Be Said I Went Down Fighting'

Life's Charges Hurt Him, McKeithen Feels

By G. MICHAEL HARMON
BATON ROUGE (AP)

— Gov. John McKeithen says Life magazine charges of Mafia influence in state government have caused "great damage" to his political career.

"I don't know if I will be able to recover from it or not," McKeithen told reporters in his first Capitol press conference in 15 months. "But if I'm to be destroyed by these scurrilous statements, let it be said I went down fighting."

McKeithen called the testimony of Life magazine reporter David Chandler, author of the April 1970 article on corruption in Louisiana government, before the legislative Mafia probe committee last week "so ridiculous as to be absurd."

He urged the committee, however, to conduct a "complete and thorough investigation" of Chandler's new charges.

McKEITHEN declined to "confirm or deny" Chandler's testimony that he gave a \$25,000 "campaign contribution" from an Alexandria bank to former State Education Superintendent Shelby Jackson.

"I don't mind talking about it as far as I'm concerned, but I don't want to embarrass Mr. Jackson," McKeithen said.

Chandler told the Mafia probes that the Guaranty Bank of Alexandria gave McKeithen \$25,000 in 1967 to prevent any other bank from obtaining a charter to operate in the city.

McKeithen, Chandler testified, gave the money to Jackson to keep him from supporting U. S. Rep. John Rarick, who was McKeithen's opponent in the 1968 election for governor.

CHANDLER said the Rapides Bank of Alexandria gave McKeithen an identical \$25,000 to stop any future bank charter.

McKeithen said, however, the Rapides Bank gave him \$5,000 also as a campaign contribution, and that neither bank asked for any favors.

Chandler's allegations, McKeithen said, were "without any supporting evidence, foundation or anything else."

"I am surprised that the committee determined to hear that type of testimony, if it is to be called that, and I am not aware of it having been allowed in a hearing of this type anywhere in the free world," McKeithen said in a letter to Committee Chairman Sen. Adrian Duplantier of New Orleans.

Citing "obvious contradic-

tions" between his testimony and Chandler's, McKeithen said he "would hope" the committee would recommend perjury proceedings.

McKeithen was asked at one point if he thought the committee had uncovered any evidence of organized crime influence in state government.

"Conclusively, perhaps not," he replied. "Nothing we could act on."

He did say, however, that the committee has "uncovered some things we were not aware of," citing the disclosures and subsequent resignations of Emmett Batson as chief attorney for the Revenue Department Tom Ashy as a member of the state Racing Commission and James Adams as a member of the state Alcoholic Beverage Control Board.

ASHY resigned after admitting placing bets with bookies. Adams quit after it was disclosed that he had a financial interest in a firm which distributed gambling-type pinball machines to retail liquor outlets regulated by the ABC board. Batson quit after it was disclosed that he failed to

file state income tax returns for two years.

McKeithen said it would be up to the committee to determine if the alleged pattern of favored treatment to Mafia firms from the state Department of Revenue was because of criminal influence.

"If the committee decides they did receive preferential treatment, I hope the committee will say who was responsible so I can take disciplinary action."

McKEITHEN said his earlier claim that he knew a number of business firms with Mafia connections was based on reports by the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission.

He declined to name a political opponent that he had testified received contributions from the mob. "I would prefer not to do that," he said. "That was based on hearsay."

He urged the Mafia committee to call Thomas Leigh, chairman of the state Mineral Board, to refute Chandler's charge that the state may be losing \$100 million a year in oil and gas revenue because of corruption.

McKeithen, however, centered his rebuttal on Chan-

dler's allegations concerning the two Alexandria banks.

"I personally, of course, respectfully request that a complete and thorough investigation be made into his allegation that I had met with various individuals at the Ramada Inn in Alexandria, at which time I agreed to stop a bank charter for the payment, he said of \$50,000," McKeithen wrote to Duplantier.

"OF COURSE, he did not make this charge, but attributed it to a source. But to the public, as reported in the press, there is very little difference."

McKeithen also gave newsmen a copy of a U. S. District Court ruling in Florida last month, convicting Life Magazine of libeling Mary Alice Firestone.

McKeithen pointed out a portion of the ruling which said Chandler provided the information upon which the libelous statement was based. The judge called Chandler's dispatch a "truly scandalous document."

The decision dealt solely with a photograph caption. The judge wrote that the caption was based only on Chandler's reporting.