

Mollenhoff: I Alerted Nixon on Fitzgerald

By Lawrence Feinberg
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Former presidential aide Clark R. Mollenhoff yesterday made public a sheaf of internal White House memos detailing his efforts—persistent but unsuccessful—to reverse the 1969 Air Force ouster of management analyst A. Ernest Fitzgerald.

Now chief of the Des Moines Register's Washington bureau, Mollenhoff presented the memos to a Civil Service Commission hearing after the examiner overruled Air Force objections.

Air Force lawyers had argued that disclosure of the memos would violate executive privilege, but Mollenhoff contended the Air Force had "no right to impose executive privilege on me."

He testified yesterday that in a meeting at the White House shortly after Fitzgerald's job was abolished in November, 1969, two Air Force officials told him that Fitzgerald had a "security problem" and a "conflict of interest."

But, Mollenhoff said, the officials never documented their accusations they promised to do. He said he quickly concluded that Fitzgerald, whom he frequently called "Ernie," had been fired because he "told the truth to Congress" a year earlier about a \$2 billion cost over-run on the C-5A cargo airplane.

Several weeks ago, the two officials named by Mollenhoff, Assistant Air Force Secretary Spencer J. Schedler and his aide, Col. James D. Pewitt, invoked executive privilege in refusing to testify about their dealings with the White House on the Fitzgerald case.



CLARK R. MOLLENHOFF



A. ERNEST FITZGERALD

But both men denied making critical remarks to anyone about Fitzgerald's loyalty or integrity.

The memos Mollenhoff presented yesterday, including one written directly after his meeting with Schedler and Pewitt, contain no explicit statements that the two men made accusations against Fitzgerald.

Mollenhoff explained that their charges were "so vague that I didn't want to put anything down."

"Schedler was vague and fumbly as hell," Mollenhoff remarked, "and Pewitt kept bracing him up, and that in and of itself made me a little suspicious."

During most of his four-hour appearance Mollenhoff spoke calmly. But toward the end of yesterday's session he clashed several times with

hearing examiner Herman D. Staiman and answered questions from Fitzgerald's lawyer which Staiman had ruled out of order.

In one of his replies, Mollenhoff said that White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler made an "untrue" statement on Feb. 1 when he said the Fitzgerald affair had not been brought to Mr. Nixon's attention.

Later, Mollenhoff told reporters he didn't know whether Mr. Nixon had been told about the firing before it was publicly announced on Nov. 9, 1969. But he said that the President certainly learned about the case from Mollenhoff's memos afterwards.

The first of these, dated Nov. 17, 1969, warned that Fitzgerald's dismissal "is likely to plague the administration for months," and said it should be reversed unless the Air Force has a "clear and overwhelming case against him."

Mollenhoff's memo suggested that Fitzgerald be given new duties in the Defense Department, possibly making studies that "deal with problems of the Kennedy-Johnson administration where there should be no reason for conflict with this administration."

A Dec. 5 memo from Mollenhoff to the President repeated the suggestion that Fitzgerald be given a new job. It said the firing had been attacked by conservatives as well as liberals, and warned that a "presidential defense (of the action) could be disastrous."

Mollenhoff also presented a Dec. 5 memo from White House aide Patrick Buchanan supporting his position. But he said Mr. Nixon disregarded his advice and "brushed off" a question about Fitzgerald at a December 1969 news conference.