

Nixon in Dark?

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Vice President Spiro Agnew was aware that he was under federal investigation as early as mid-July but informed President Nixon about it only hours before the story became public.

Sources close to Agnew said the Vice President had "an inkling several weeks ago" that he was being investigated for possible violation of bribery, conspiracy and tax laws. He is known to have discussed the issue with his old friend and personal attorney, George W. White Jr.

White, a Towson lawyer who has been Agnew's troubleshooter when legal questions arose in the past, issued a terse "no comment" when asked about the report yesterday.

The Vice President was formally notified of the investigation last week in a letter hand-delivered from George Beall, the United States attorney for Maryland, to an Agnew attorney. President Nixon was informed of this development by Agnew either Sunday or Monday at Camp David, according to White House sources.

White House deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren See INTERPLAY, A11, Col. 1

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said the President was notified about Agnew's statement affirming his innocence before it was issued Monday night. But he would not go beyond this, declaring at one point that he was "not going to get into a discussion of why I cannot discuss it . . ."

Among the questions Warren declined to answer were queries about whether Agnew had actually spoken to the President and exactly when the notification was given.

Nor would Warren issue a statement proclaiming presidential support of Agnew. Instead, he repeated over and over what he had said Monday night—that the Vice President had "issued a statement" and that the White House had no comment at this point.

Agnew has been in virtual public seclusion since June 11, when he spoke to the National Association of Attorneys General in St. Louis and condemned the Senate Watergate hearings for in-

duiting in "a gross perversion of justice" he said, could ruin the lives of 6 innocent men.

In that speech Agnew supported Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox's plea to the Senate committee that hearings be suspended pending prosecution. Otherwise, said Agnew, the hearings would "muddy the waters of justice beyond redemption" by trying the Nixon administration "before the court of public opinion."

The Agnew speech was welcomed by the embattled Nixon administration on two grounds. First, there was the Vice President's own freedom of taint in the Watergate case. Secondly, it was known that Agnew up until a week before the speech had been weighing a course of action some of his supporters called "the Coolidge option."

This is in reference to the silence of Vice President Calvin Coolidge in the face of scandals that embroiled the administration of President Warren Harding. Coolidge succeeded to the presidency when Harding died and was then elected to a term in his own right.

Agnew's speech in St. Louis was supported to signal his emergence on the Watergate issue as a vigor-

ous defender of the President. But it didn't turn out that way.

Political supporters of the Vice President told him soon afterward that the response to the speech was negative because, as one Agnew backer put it, "the general public feeling was that Agnew was just sounding the party line to shut it down and cover it up."

The Vice President did not subsequently repeat his line of attack, though he never undercut Mr. Nixon.

On June 12, the day after the St. Louis speech, he gave an essentially unpolitical talk on world trade to the Michigan Manufacturers Association in Lansing. He spoke again on world trade and foreign policy issues on June 28 to the annual convention of Lions International in Miami Beach.

Agnew's next public appearance came more than a month later, when he spoke July 31 to the Worldwide Agricultural Attache Conference in Washington. Trade was also the theme of this speech, which was so uncontroversial that one

wire service gave it only a three-paragraph story.

The only passing reference to Watergate issues in this talk occurred near the end of the speech when Agnew said:

"Government is proceeding, and new initiatives for peace are going forward. The alleged paralysis is more a paralysis of thinking, an attitude which pervades too much in Washington these days."

Agnew's inactivity for the past six weeks has been described by some intimates as greater than at any other time. But that has not been because of a lack of willingness on the Vice President's part.

Despite Agnew's publicly stated desire for an important role in the Nixon administration's "New Federalism" programs, he has not been asked to resume his first-term role as an emissary of the administration to state and local government.

Agnew's chief service for the administration has been meeting with visiting heads of foreign states. He also cast an important tie-breaking vote in the Senate last month.

Otherwise, in the words of Agnew Press Secretary Marsh Thomson, the Vice

President "has been sticking close to the office." He has also found times for frequent rounds of golf with such partners as presidential counsellor Melvin R. Laird and House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford.

Golfing partners of the Vice President say he plays frequently but has learned to conserve time by driving from green to green and marking himself down for two putts without actually putting each hole. He has also been playing tennis whenever he could.

Some vice presidential sources indicate that Agnew was well advanced on a "low profile" policy even before he became aware of the Maryland investigation.

"There are problems with any speech now," one Agnew intimate said last week. "Until the (Watergate) hearings are over, you run into the constant business of having to dance on eggs about what you respond to."

Others who are close to Agnew believe the Vice President's well-developed inclination to say as little as possible on Watergate was deepened by knowledge that he would soon be named in stories about the Baltimore

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investigation. They offer no insight on why he did not immediately inform Mr. Nixon about the investigation—although they say it is possible the President learned of the investigation anyway from Justice Department sources.

Agnew's own response to the report of possible law violations contrasts sharply with the White House response to first news of the Watergate break-in, which press secretary Ronold L. Ziegler termed "a third-rate burglary." Five days later President Nixon said the case was under investigation by the proper authorities and that he would decline comment.

In the Agnew case, the Vice President immediately declared his innocence of any wrongdoing, issuing a statement before many of the news outlets that received it had become aware of the investigation.

flinch, so he immediately prepared the statement declaring his innocence" said Thomson. Thomson added that Agnew intended to remain "as effective a member of the administration as possible" and speak out whenever he thought it would do some good.

Thompson said Agnew spent yesterday "doing office work" in his suite of rooms in the New Executive Office Building. The Vice President declined to make any further comment about the on-going investigation after the brief declaration of innocence he made the night before.