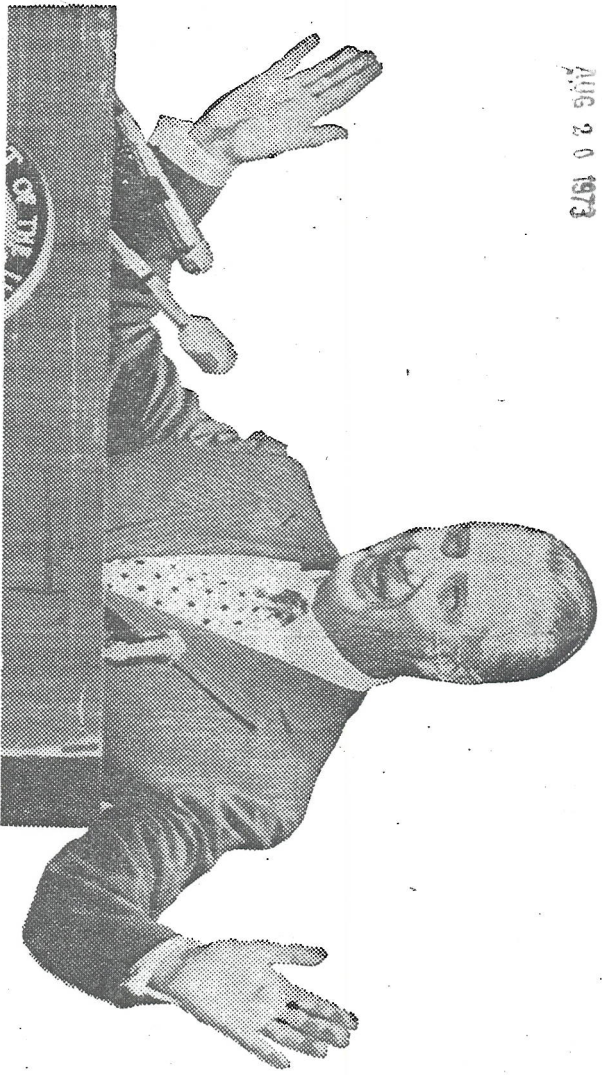


Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Laird's Warning About Agnew



A confidential telephone call from top White House aide Melvin R. Laird to a Republican congressional leader, warning him not to go all-out in defense of Vice President Spiro Agnew, is new and harsh evidence to party professionals of the depth of the crisis that threatens Mr. Agnew.

In his Aug. 7 telephone call to Rep. John B. Anderson of Illinois, chairman of the House Republican conference, Laird carefully specified that he was not talking as a White House aide. His message: Don't get on a limb in the Agnew affair, particularly with an all-out defense of the Vice President. Stay away from the Agnew affair as far as possible.

Agnew is under intense federal investigation on charges of possible criminal violations of various federal statutes involving bribery, extortion, tax fraud and conspiracy.

Republicans who know about the Laird call to Anderson (described as "astonished" by the warning) assume that Laird and possible other party grandees have contacted other senior Republicans with similar warnings. Moreover, the Laird telephone call

to Anderson fits a pattern that has infuriated the Agnew camp. For example:

1. Before Agnew himself received formal notice from the Justice Department that he was under investigation, Attorney General Elliot Richardson reported (in late July) to White House staff chief Alexander M. Haig Jr., with a briefing on all aspects of the case. On Aug. 2, Agnew's attorneys received their letter from the prosecutors.

2. A prominent television commentator was privately cautioned by an official of the Justice Department 10 days ago in words similar to those used by Laird to Anderson. Don't go overboard for Agnew; you may wind up with egg on your face.

3. The White House has gone to embarrassing lengths not to put the President on record as to the Vice President's innocence. White House spokesman Gerald Warren will only say that Mr. Nixon's confidence in Agnew has not changed.

4. The New York Times front-page dispatch of Aug. 15, outlining charges against Agnew in vivid detail, is believed by furious Agnew allies to have

emanated from high levels of the Justice Department (who flatly deny it), not from Maryland sources also implicated in the charges against Agnew.

It is not surprising that allies of Agnew, whose talents have sometimes been grossly used by the President to advance Mr. Nixon's interests, would be filled with dark suspicion over these incidents. They regard them as proof of nefarious underground administration warfare against Agnew, partly to ease the President's immense Watergate burdens. Thus, in this conspiratorial view—so understandable on the part of Agnew intimates—Mr. Nixon or Republicans close to him are greasing the skids for the hapless Vice President. Under the 25th amendment to the Constitution, they are quietly preparing to nominate a successor—most likely John B. Connally.

It was Connally who saved Mr. Nixon from disaster in the inflationary crisis of August 1971. Perhaps Connally, the former Democratic governor of Texas who turned Republican at a moment of maximum help to the Watergate-beleaguered President last spring, can help again. To Agnewites, that fits the known fact that Connally recently

cancelled his plans for a long trip abroad and the lesser-known fact that some Connally friends predict he will be back in the administration in October.

But, in fact, the Laird warnings may spring from something far less conspiratorial. They may be a flashing signal of caution based not on any desire to do in Agnew but on a rational and informed judgment that Agnew is a goner. Likewise, Richardson's July briefing of Haig, before Agnew himself had formal notification, may also be explainable as a rational act based on the President's prior right to know. "Is that normal?" a Justice Department official repeated in answer to our question. "Hell, nothing's normal in this case. We're playing it by ear."

But such quiet and rational explanation is understandably difficult for Agnewites. The mood in the Agnew camp has grown isolated and embittered. Now, with word secretly passed to "keep clear" of the Agnew affair, that mood will intensify, with dangerous implications for the Republican future no matter how the investigation finally ends.