

Agnew Lent Support to Friend's Firm

By Jack Anderson

Vice President Spiro Agnew has twice pressured a small federal agency to give handsome no-bid contracts to a Maryland company run by an old friend and political campaign contributor.

The lucky company was Maps, Inc., of Baltimore, which does aerial photography and related mapping. Until his death in January, 1971, its president was Thomas Collins, who had been a member of the Baltimore County Personnel and Salary Board while Agnew was the county's chief executive.

A few months after Agnew became vice president, Collins began to seek a \$121,900 air map contract with the Redevelopment Land Agency, a housing and planning agency in Washington. Aware of his old friend's new power in Washington, Collins called Agnew.

Agnew had an aide call RLA, and the agency awarded the contract to Maps, Inc. One competitor protested loudly to RLA that political pressure had been exerted, but the complaint was ignored.

In 1971, RLA was preparing to award another mapping contract, and the agency's executive director, Melvin Mister, got an unusual letter from Agnew's administrative assistant, Arthur Sohmer.

"Two years ago," Sohmer reminded Mister, "this office con-

tacted you on behalf of Maps, Inc., a Baltimore firm, which had expressed an interest in doing topographic mapping for your agency."

The vice presidential message went on to praise Maps, Inc. at some length, then added pointedly: "Any consideration that you might be able to give to their interest would be appreciated by this office."

On Sept. 24, exactly a month after the Agnew letter, Maps, Inc. got a \$158,600 contract from RLA. Once again, a competing firm told RLA it had been unfairly treated.

In Dundalk, Md. the Baltimore suburb where Maps, Inc., is located, Mrs. Collins, who briefly succeeded her husband as president, explained: "The Agnews were our friends. Tom and Ted knew each other well. So did Judy (Agnew's wife) and I. They lived about a mile from us."

She insisted that to the best of her knowledge her late husband's political donations to Agnew were in the form of fund-raising tickets and were at most in the low hundreds.

At RLA, a spokesman said Maps, Inc., "did a good job on both contracts"—which our study of the files tends to confirm. The spokesman said: "It was a validly awarded contract. The contacts (by Agnew's office) had no effect." As to the propriety of a vice president using his office to pressure a fed-

eral agency on behalf of a former crony, the RLA said, "We treated it like any other communication about a constituent."

At Agnew's office, Sohmer refused to speak to us, but a spokesman said, "We regard this very much in the nature of a routine referral. No pressure at all was intended." In fact, such referrals are "routine" only from Congressmen. When they come from the White House or vice president, they have the earmarks of direct orders.

Footnote: Neither the FBI nor the Justice Department has contacted RLA or Maps, Inc., in connection with the federal probe into possible kickbacks given to Agnew and other Maryland political figures.

Oil and Secrets—Efforts by the White House to ease the energy crisis with off-shore oil and gas drilling have run smack into the Pentagon's secret installations in the Gulf of Mexico.

Under orders from the White House, the Interior Department plans to lease huge new undersea tracts to the oil companies for exploration and production. Unfortunately, the drilling poses a threat not only to the environment, but to the Pentagon's choicest defense sites.

The Defense Department has complained that giant stationary rigs in the Gulf would make low altitude flights and tests of

weapons systems, including "heat-seeking" missiles, dangerous. The missiles, they fear, might even zero in on an oil rig, destroying the rig and its workers.

The Pentagon has a \$1.5 billion investment in the five Florida bases. A classified congressional report bottled up in the House Appropriations Committee indicates that the bases and their 50,000 civilian and military employees might have to be moved at a staggering cost to the taxpayers of \$3.4 billion.

Secret meetings between Pentagon and Interior officials have failed to reach an accommodation on auctioning lands to the oil companies. A session last month between Interior Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton and Deputy Defense Secretary William P. Clements Jr. ended in polite disagreement.

Besides the military's objections, the Interior Department has to contend with the opposition of Gulf coast public officials who fear a repeat of the Santa Barbara oil spill could ruin the white beaches.

Meanwhile, the Interior Department is grumbling that if its leasing plans for the Gulf are thwarted, they may open up the Atlantic seaboard to off-shore drilling, an even hotter political potato than the Gulf controversy.

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