

Agnew Pressure Denied

White House Moves From 'No Comment'

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The White House broke its puzzling silence on Vice President Spiro T. Agnew's status yesterday with a cautious statement of support and denials of any White House effort to remove him from office.

But even as these statements were being issued, there was a fresh report that a principal White House official has predicted Agnew's resignation in the "next few weeks." The report came from an Eastern Republican who said he was told by the official within the past few days that Agnew's departure would give the President "an opportunity to set a whole new tone for the administration."

These developments came amid a barrage of reports that great tensions are building up between Agnew and the White House staff. They are based on the belief among Agnew associates that a concerted effort is under way within the administration to build up pressure for Agnew's resignation.

The beleaguered Vice President is under investigation by a federal grand jury in Baltimore in connection with allegations that he may have received kickbacks or other illegal payments from businessmen while governor of Maryland.

Deputy White House press secretary Gerald L. Warren yesterday sought to deflate reports of a White House effort to undermine Agnew's position.

He had declined on Tuesday to make any response to reports that Agnew was considering resignation. Nor would he respond to questions about Mr. Nixon's support for the Vice President.

Yesterday Warren changed the script. He branded as "false" stories alleging that

"there is a disposition on the part of the White House or people in the White House to force the Vice President to resign or that the White House is applying pressure on the Vice President to resign, or that the White House is the source of the stories which say that the Vice President will resign.

"Now beyond that," Warren said, "I will not have any further comment until the Attorney General completes his assessment of this situation and addresses this matter."

Under questioning, Warren did say that Mr. Nixon stood by his Sept. 5 press conference statement expressing confidence in Agnew's "integrity during the period that he served as Vice President."

Some of Agnew's strongest supporters continued to express the view that the Vice President is being undermined by the White House.

Victor Gold, Agnew's former press secretary and one of his most outspoken defend-

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ers, cited the "no comments" of Warren to questions Tuesday about whether Mr. Nixon still supported Agnew.

"This is calculated by the White House to keep the Agnew story alive," Gold said. "I blame the staff at the highest level, by which I mean Melvin Laird and General (Alexander M.) Haig."

Both Haig and Laird denied Gold's charges. They said they were not involved in any effort to force Agnew's resignation.

Gold said he urged Laird to call Warren and have him make an unequivocal statement of support for Agnew.

"Let's have the President and his people stand up," Gold said. "They can wipe out this talk overnight. Why don't they say, 'We support the Vice President' like they supported (H. R.) Haldeman and (John) Ehrlichman. They don't do what the Vice President did in the case of the President and Watergate."

Warren made it clear that his "no comments" Tuesday and his statement yesterday came after direct discussions with the President.

"The President is a calculating man," Gold said. "He knows what people will read into omissions."

Agnew's present press secretary, J. Marsh Thomson, did not accuse the White House of spreading the story that Agnew would quit. But Thomson's own statement reflected the growing tension between the President and the Vice

President.

"We don't see what is going on as a conscious concoction of the White House," Thomson said.

Asked whether it was "an unconscious concoction," Thomson replied: "We don't have unanimity on that around here, but we regard it as unworthy to suggest in any way that Messrs. Laird and Haig want him to resign."

Thomson said that Agnew would speak next Wednesday in California to a closed-door session of insurance executive in Pebble Beach and to an open meeting of the California Federation of Republican Women three days later in Los Angeles. The Pebble Beach meeting is closed at the request of the insurance executives, not Agnew, Thomson added.

Thomson denied reports that Agnew had canceled an appearance next Tuesday before the Forum on Growth in Tulsa because of the resignation stories. He said the Vice President had declined the invitation in August.

Sen. Henry Bellmon has asked the Vice President to reconsider and he is doing so," Thomson said. "But it is unlikely that he will make the speech because of the conflict with his California appearances."

Agnew will take a day or two of rest between the Pebble Beach and Los Angeles speeches, Thomson said. It is "likely" that he will visit Frank Sinatra in Palm Springs, Thomson said, though no definite schedule has been decided.

On Capitol Hill, a number of Senate Democrats privately expressed anger at the thought that a presidentially nominated Vice President to replace Agnew would use his position to promote his own presidential candidacy in 1976.

Some Democrats expressed the view that the Democrats should attempt to block any vice-presidential nominee unless he pledges not to seek the presidency.

Some leading Republicans also are known to feel the same way, believing that anyone who might be nominated would be hand-picked by Mr. Nixon to win the party nomination in 1976.

At a news conference in New York, former Texas Gov. John Connally—frequently mentioned as a vice-presidential replacement if Agnew does resign—fended off all questions about Agnew or the vice presidency.

Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller

of New York declined to give a direct answer on whether he would accept a vice-presidential nomination.

At the White House, Warren declined to concede that his "no comment" statements Tuesday when questioned about a report that Agnew was considering resigning contributed to speculations that there was a rift between the President and Vice President.

Warren said he had made no comment on the original report and that the Vice President also had refused to comment.

"We felt that was appropriate then," he said.