

A Dramatic Day On the Hill

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Los Angeles Times

Washington

At a few minutes past 4 p.m. yesterday, Vice President Agnew walked into House Speaker Carl Albert's office and handed the Democratic leader something he didn't expect and didn't want — an invitation to investigate charges being made against the vice president.

What followed was a 90-minute meeting described by participants as "very tense, very serious," in which the embattled vice president made a strong plea to congressional leaders to take over a probe that Agnew's own administration wants a grand jury to conduct.

Albert's first action after Agnew handed him the letter was to call in House leaders of both parties. House parliamentarian Lewis Deschler approached Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford (Rep-Mich.), Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (Dem-Mass.), majority whip John McFall (Dem-Calif.) and minority whip Leslie Arends (Rep-Ill.) on the House floor and quietly asked

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them to come to the Speaker's office on an urgent matter.

Before long, they were joined by Senate minority leader Hugh Scott (Rep-Pa.) and Senator Barry Goldwater (Rep-Ariz.).

JAM

And in almost no time at all, the narrow Capitol corridor outside the Speaker's office was jammed with House members, congressional staff and reporters eagerly waiting to find out what was going to happen. At one point, there seemed to be more members in the hall than on the House floor itself.

Their interest was natural. Ever since reports began to circulate of Agnew's meeting earlier in the day with President Nixon, rumors of an Agnew resignation once more filled the cloakrooms.

But if the vice president were going to resign, they asked, why was he visiting with Speaker Albert?

Albert himself had time to wonder. Ford had called him early in the morning to tell him Agnew wanted to

meet with the speaker on an important matter later in the afternoon.

INSIDE

Inside Albert's office, the lawmakers heard Agnew make his case. One participant said, "The vice president appeared very anxious — anxious in the sense that he was urging some affirmative action be taken."

Ever since the Watergate hearings began to raise questions about President Nixon's involvement, the Democratic leadership has treated impeachment like a hot potato. They discouraged talk of impeaching the President and, from all indications, were content to let the vice president's problems be settled by the courts.

During the meeting, the leaders discussed mechanics, such as whether the inquiry should be conducted by the judiciary committee or a select committee. According to participants, Agnew himself did not specify which he would prefer.

CALL

Shortly before 5 p.m., Albert sent Representative McFall to ask judiciary

committee chairman Peter Rodino (Dem-N.J.) and Representative Edward Hutchinson (Rep-Mich.), the committee's ranking Republican, to join the meeting.

Rodino indicated he wasn't eager to take up the matter but that, if any committee did, he believed the judiciary committee should handle the inquiry.

Finally, Agnew told the Congressmen he had prepared copies of the letter and was going to hand them to reporters when he left Albert's office.

At this point, Ford suggested that the vice president wait until the letter had been made part of the official House record before he released it.

FLOOR

Albert agreed and, while Agnew waited in the Speaker's office, Albert and the other leaders went to the floor where the House was just finishing debate on an immigration bill.

The drama of the unorthodox procedure was masked somewhat by Albert's low key approach.

The Speaker simply announced that he had a communication for the House and handed the three-page letter to majority reading clerk Charles Hackney who read it to a hushed House.

Albert quickly adjourned the House and returned to his office to say good-bye to Agnew. When he emerged from Albert's office, 90 minutes after going in, the vice president told waiting newsmen only that "the letter speaks for itself and I'll have no further statement at this time."

GRUMBLES

There was some grumbling on the House floor among Democrats to the effect they did not have some warning that the letter was

coming. But Albert's quick adjournment prevented any more overt reaction.

There seemed to be general agreement in the corridors that Agnew believed his best chances for vindication would come in the House of Representatives rather than the courts.

As one liberal Democrat was overheard saying: "He might have a rougher time with 12 honest men than 435 who aren't so honest."