

The Agnew 'Resignation'

The Birth of a Rumor

Washington

"If I read that conversation right, Agnew's in trouble."

That's all Josiah Lee Auspitz remembers saying to a couple of friends here after a visit to the white house on September 15. But Auspitz's conversation had been with presidential counsel Leonard Garment, who presumably reflects high level White House thinking about Agnew.

So it's not surprising that while Auspitz, a former white house aide, returned to work on his Ph.D. Dissertation in Boston, his casual comment was passed around the capital grapevine, gaining consequence in the retelling.

Eventually Auspitz' conversation with Garment led to stories by the United Press International and CBS. Auspitz himself attained brief prominence as a source of White House views while Garment maintained an uncomfortable official silence on the whole matter.

VIEW

Such speculation has been the bane of the vice president's existence and, his supporters contend, has un-



LEONARD GARMENT
An apprehensive laugh

dermined his already precarious position. The Garment-Auspitz contribution was only a dribble in the flood of Agnew leaks. But its genesis points up the difficulty in separating fact from fancy in a momentous public controversy.

It started purely by accident, according to Auspitz. A past president of the Ripon Society, a liberal Republican group, he had stopped in at the White House to vis-

it a fellow Riponite. While he was there he chatted briefly with Garment, a friend from Auspitz' days at the White House in 1969.

Agnew's name came up in the conversation. According to Auspitz, Garment didn't say much directly about the vice president. But as Auspitz later said in an interview, he drew "an inference," from "things like the expression in Garment's voice and his eyes.

Before he left Washington for Boston Auspitz mentioned his talk with Garment to at least two other persons — Ron Speed, president of the Ripon Society, and Michael MacLeod, its national director.

TROUBLES

Auspitz later said he made only a brief and hazy reference to Agnew's troubles. As Speed later recalled it, though, Auspitz was more specific.

"He said he thought the vice president was going to resign," Speed said later.

Speed, who left Washington for Minneapolis, claims he didn't discuss Auspitz' remarks with anyone.

But MacLeod, who is based in Washington, dropped the tidbit from Garment into "a conversation with friends," the very next day, September 16.

"I was very circumspect," MacLeod insisted.

Somehow or other, though, the word got around, and fed the brush fire of rumor about Agnew's resignation that was sweeping Washington.

On Friday, September 21, nearly a week after his talk with Garment, Auspitz got a call from Roger Mudd of CBS wens. Mudd told him that CBS had broadcast a report the night before, attributed to a top Nixon aide that Agnew was going to resign, and that the President had already decided on a successor.

He wanted to know, according to Auspitz, whether Auspitz could substantiate the report.

STORY

Auspitz said he thought it strange that CBS would broadcast a story first and then seek to confirm it.

Mudd told him, Auspitz said, that CBS had confirmed the story "independently," but wanted additional support.

Auspitz claimed he only told Mudd that Garment had said none of those things in their conversation.

But Mudd evidently inter-



JOSIAH LEE AUSPITZ
A casual comment

preted their conversation differently.

He went on CBS radio to report that Auspitz had said that Garment had indicated recently that Agnew might be on his way out. Mudd quoted Auspitz as saying that "there were intimations the Agnew thing might be opening up."

After his interview with Mudd, Auspitz phoned Garment and reported the conversation with him.

Garment laughed, according to Speed, but his amusement was mixed with apprehension.

"You better knock that down, Lee," he said.

Meanwhile, Speed was called by a UPI reporter who, Speed said, "wanted to get a fix" on a report that a high-ranking Republican official had predicted Agnew's resignation.

Speed said he told UPI he couldn't help, because he didn't associate the question with Auspitz's conversation with Garment. "I wish I had put the two things together," he said.

Somebody did, evidently.

Because on the next day, September 22, UPI reported that the Ripon Society had identified Garment as a source of White House leaks about Agnew.

The next week, Auspitz said, that to his embarrassment people kept coming up to him and saying: "I hear you were the source of the leak about Agnew quitting." said Auspitz: "I was appalled."

Auspitz, MacLeod and Speed spent a good bit of time on the phone trying to explain to each other how the story had gotten around. "If you ever figure it out," Speed said, "I wish you would let us know."

Said Auspitz ruefully: "It will be a long time before I come to Washington again."

Washington Post