

Richardson Says Nixon OK'd Agnew Bargaining

Washington

President Nixon approved each major step in the negotiations that led to Spiro T. Agnew's resignation as vice president and his plea of no contest to a tax evasion charge, Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson said yesterday.

Although the President did not rule on specific terms of the deal, he had approved of its "general direction and fundamental basis," Richardson said at an hour-long news conference.

Speaking with reporters on the first day after Agnew resigned in a dramatic courtroom scene in Baltimore, Richardson depicted the White House as being considerably more involved in the negotiations between Agnew and the Justice Department than had been disclosed before.

Even the first meeting between Richardson and Agnew's lawyers, Richardson said, was prompted by a telephone call from the President's counsel, J. Fred Buzhardt.

PLEA

Agnew pleaded no contest Wednesday to one count of income tax evasion. The government chose not to press other charges involving bribery and extortion and asked for leniency in the sentencing of the former vice president. He was fined \$10,000 and placed on unsupervised probation for three years.

Richardson, under critical questioning, defended the agreement strongly yesterday, arguing that it was more in the public interest than a long, acrimonious trial of the vice president one which would leave "an ulcer on the body politic."

Richardson hinted — and other sources confirmed —

that the deal was never solid until it was disclosed early

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this week with U.S. District Judge Walter E. Hoffman.

One set of plea-bargaining sessions collapsed in failure in September. Then the Justice Department was approached with an offer to resume talks last Saturday.

TERMS

Two knowledgeable administration sources said that the Justice Department did not change its position on the terms for Agnew between the first and second set of negotiations.

Richardson made it clear that he considers the federal criminal investigation of Agnew is closed.

However, he acknowledged that the former vice president still may face civil action by the Internal Revenue Service for failure to pay income taxes in certain years not covered by the charge to which he pleaded no contest.

Richardson emphatically dismissed the suggestion that he might be considered in line for the vice presidency. As Agnew's accuser and the man who negotiated the deal in which he resigned, Richardson said he should not be considered "for a moment" as a possible successor.

WHITE HOUSE

The disclosures he made of White House and Presidential involvement were in response to repeated questions. Bit by bit, sometimes reluctantly, Richardson indicated far closer White House attention to the negotiated agreement and final settlement than had been put out by the White House previously.

Richardson was asked if Mr. Nixon put any limits on the bargaining.

"The President was kept, of course, fully informed at all times," Richardson answered. "He fully approved each of the major steps that were taken in the course of

these negotiations.

Richardson said Mr. Nixon "did not participate in the negotiations as such. He had, of course, as President of the United States to be satisfied that the essential elements of what was being

done were consistent with the public interest."

He said the President did not attempt to set any limits on the negotiations. However, he hinted that the President may have expressed concern about the effects of a long trial involving his vice president.

DETAILS

Richardson said that Mr. Nixon had never been told the precise details of the evidence against Agnew and that the President had not wanted to know them.

Richardson disclosed that Mr. Nixon had, however, been aware of a charge, turned up by investigators, that Agnew had received payments in his vice presidential office, purportedly in return for favorable treatment by the General Services Administration. One sum was \$2500.

Richardson said that neither round of plea-bargaining by Agnew had been initiated by the Justice Department.

He left the impression that both had been initiated by Agnew's lawyers, although the first call on the first round of negotiations had come from Buzhardt at the White House.

Richardson was accompanied at the news conference by George Beall, the U.S. attorney in Baltimore who had headed the Agnew investigation.

Both men acknowledged that they differed on the subject of what the government should demand of Agnew. The prosecutors in Baltimore obviously favored stricter punishment than a \$10,000 fine and three years probation.

Beall, who reportedly favored demanding a jail sentence for Agnew, indicated that he and Richardson had merely agreed to disagree.

Washington Post