

Agnew Investigators: Unlikely, Varied Team

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In many ways, it was an unlikely team—George Beall, Barnet D. Skolnik, Russell T. Baker Jr. and Ronald S. Liebman, the men who conducted the investigation that toppled Vice President Spiro T. Agnew.

Beall, the U.S. attorney for Maryland, staid, quiet, cautious; Skolnik, assistant U.S. attorney, intense, animated, a political liberal; Baker, the son of a prominent Baltimore real estate man and a relative newcomer in the prosecutor's office, and Liebman, the rookie, with no experience in investigations of political corruption.

The U.S. attorney's office in Baltimore had over the last decade built up a reputation for its investigation of public officials.

The two Democratic U.S. attorneys who preceded Beall—former U.S. Sen. Joseph D. Tydings and Stephen H. Sachs—had conducted investigations that led to convictions of former Sen. Daniel B. Brewster (D-Md.), former Rep. Thomas F. Johnson (D-Md.), former Rep. John Dowdy (D-Tex.) and Jesse S. Baggett, former chairman of the Prince George's County Board of Commissioners.

But, Beall, a 35-year-old lawyer from a conservative Maryland Republican background, the brother of U.S. Sen. J. Glenn Beall Jr. (R-Md.) and son of the late U.S. Sen. J. Glenn Beall Sr., was, perhaps, one of the most unlikely of men to have played a major role in the downfall of Spiro T. Agnew.

Ironically, Beal indirectly owed his job to Agnew. While Beall's appointment formally was made by President Nixon and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, the political scheme of things gives the real choice of a U.S. attorney in many states to the U.S. senators in that state from the party of the administration in power.

In Maryland, the lone GOP senator when Beall was appointed in June, 1970, was Charles McC. Mathias. Mathias, who, like the Bealle family comes from Western Maryland, is a long-time friend of the Bealls and was high on George Beall's abilities, according to Mathias' associates at the time.

Agnew, however, as Vice President and Maryland's top Republican, did possess

an informal veto power over any federal appointee in his state and could have objected to Beall, whom he knew only vaguely.

Beall had had on prosecutorial experience when he moved from private law practice in Baltimore to the U.S. attorney's office. Previously he had been a deputy U.S. marshal in Baltimore and a law clerk for Chief Judge Simon Sobeloff of the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

What Beall stressed the day he was sworn in as U.S. attorney for Maryland was the need to go after violators of narcotics and pollution laws, but he also said there was a need to investigate predecessors had done.

"Corruption of public officials is heinous, abominable and has to be ferreted out. The man in the street has to know that certain people are incorruptible. That's how I view this office."

Yet, until early this year, Beall produced no major indictments of Maryland political figures. Then, prior to the disclosure of the investigation of Agnew, the office did obtain indictments of State Sen. Clarence Mitchell (D-Baltimore) on tax charges, and Del. James A. (Turk) Scott (D-Baltimore), who was later murdered, on drug charges.

In directing the Agnew investigation, Beall, never overly loquacious with the press, became almost totally unavailable and clamped a tight lid of secrecy on the probe. Previously, reporters and the public had easy access to the offices of his assistants, but Beall changed all that by having installed a special lock on the main door that leads to all the prosecutors' offices.

New filing cabinets, with combination locks rather than key locks were brought in to hold the Agnew case documents.

If Beall was the captain in the Agnew investigation then Barnet (Barney) Skolnik was the first sergeant.

Skolnik, 33, is a veteran prosecutor with a publicly stated fierce desire to root out political corruption. Skolnik broke into the U.S. attorney's office as an assistant U.S. attorney under Sachs and later successfully prosecuted Prince George's Commissioner Baggett and developer Ralph D. Rocks in a bribery case. He also played a major courtroom role in the conviction of Rep. Dowdy in late 1971.

In the view of many observers of the Baltimore in-

vestigation, it was Skolnik, the only experienced prosecutor on the team, who made the U.S. attorney's office investigation go.

According to one of the attorneys for a lesser figure in the Agnew probe, Skolnik, while attempting to persuade the person to cooperate with prosecutors in exchange for the promise of some form of immunity, described the investigation in seafaring terms.

Skolnik told the lawyer's client to imagine a boat that is about to leave the dock. It only has so many tickets for sale and most of them have been sold. Now, would the attorney's client like to be on that boat when it leaves, or would he like to be left standing on the dock? The message, the attorney said, was quite clear.

Last year, Skolnik left the U.S. attorney's office for several months to work in the presidential campaign of Sen. Edmund Muskie (D-Maine). He returned to the U.S. attorney's office in September, 1972.

Because of Skolnik's reputation as a liberal Democrat, many observers of the Baltimore probe felt that Agnew, who had already publicly attacked Assistant Attorney General Henry C. Petersen in connection with the investigation, would later turn on

Skolnik because of his Democratic connections.

Such an attack never materialized.

Baker, 31, a former Peace Corps volunteer, joined the office in time to help Skolnik in the 1971 prosecution of Baggett and the 1972 prosecution of Rocks. He has gradually picked up experience and reportedly has conducted vigorous questioning of witnesses before the grand jury.

Liebman, 29, is the least experienced of the investigative team, but began to play a larger role in the investigation and questioning of witnesses as time went on. He had previously been a law clerk of Judge R. Dorsey Watkins, the former chief judge of the U.S. District Court in Baltimore.

Supplying the legwork and long hours of painstaking investigation were special agents of the Internal Revenue Service who have played an anonymous role in the probe. An IRS spokesman, Wilson Fadely, said yesterday that the Freedom of Information Act does not require IRS to divulge the names of those agents involved in specific investigations.

Since the probe is continuing, Fadely said, the future investigation could be hampered if the identities of the agents are made public.