

Buzhardt's Curious Role

Behind Agnew's Fall

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Federal prosecutors were prepared to ask a federal grand jury to indict former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew on approximately 50 counts of bribery, extortion and tax evasion, according to informed sources.

The knowledge that the Justice Department felt it had the evidence to seek such a massive indictment "was the incentive and moved Agnew to a prompt resolution of the case," one source said.

Agnew resigned last Wednesday, pleaded "no contest" to a single charge of federal tax evasion and agreed to the release of 40-page Justice Department statement outlining the government's detailed charges

that Agnew sought and received thousands of dollars in kickbacks from engineers while he was Baltimore county executive, governor of Maryland and U.S. vice president.

Referring to the allegations of payoffs in the Justice Department document, one source said: "There were no other witnesses on direct payments, but the prosecutors had voluminous corroborative material about the flow of money and meetings."

J. Fred Buzhardt, a special presidential counsel, played the dominant role in bringing Agnew's lawyers and the Justice Department into agreement, at one point arguing against taking the case to the grand jury, according to government and other sources.

Buzhardt, these sources said, appeared deliberately to keep both Agnew's lawyers and the Justice Depart-

ment in the dark about the exact nature of his instructions. For a time, the sources said, Buzhardt's actions led Attorney General Elliot Richardson to wonder if he were going to be fired.

Plea bargaining between Agnew's lawyers and top Justice officials, which began in September and then broke off, was initiated by Buzhardt. But according to sources on both sides, Buzhardt never made it clear whether he was acting on orders from the President.

The second round of negotiations, which resulted in Agnew's agreement to plead "no contest" and resign, also was initiated by Buzhardt.

Buzhardt's performance as go-between was characterized as "slippery," by one Justice Department official, who said that Buzhardt kept Richardson guessing

about what the President wanted.

One Justice Department source said that the official White House silence on the negotiations and the Agnew investigation led Richardson to wonder at one point whether he was about to be fired by the President for insisting on proceeding with the grand jury investigation.

Sources in the Justice Department and sources close to Agnew agreed yesterday that Buzhardt's purpose was to effect the quickest possible resolution of the Agnew crisis, heading off a prolonged court battle over constitutional issues and the prospect of a sitting vice president who had been indicted.

Sources on both sides said they knew that a speedy resolution would have to include Agnew's resignation, meaning that Buzhardt, in effect, was working to oust the vice president.