

Agnew Sought Help on Probe

By Richard M. Cohen
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Former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew spoke to former Attorney General Richard Kleindienst at least three times last February to complain about the investigation of political corruption in Baltimore County and, to charge it was designed to embarrass him, according to informed sources.

As a result of these conversations, which were promptly reported by Kleindienst to the Baltimore prosecutors, federal officials said they considered charging the former Vice President with obstruction of justice. But they said they later dropped any mention of such charges or the conversations in the hectic days before Agnew resigned Oct. 10 and pleaded no contest to a single charge of income tax evasion.

U.S. Attorney for Maryland George Beall, who directed the federal investigation, said yesterday that the complaints to Kleindienst included a charge by Agnew that the investigation might be politically motivated and designed to generate damaging publicity.

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Agnew pays fine with \$10,000 check. Page A10.

Agnew Complained About Probe in Md.

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Beall said that Kleindienst reported that Agnew mentioned Assistant U.S. Attorney Barnet Skolnik in this context, noting that Skolnik had briefly worked for the presidential campaign of Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Maine) in 1971.

Beall said that Kleindienst suggested to him that Skolnik, the leader of the investigatory team, assume a "low profile" during the probe by not participating in the interrogation of witnesses who were known to be close to Agnew. Beall said he agreed with Kleindienst's suggestion and emphasized that at no time did the former Attorney General suggest that the investigation be "tailored" or aborted.

Beall said that at that time—early February—his office had no evidence of corruption during Agnew's tenure as executive of Baltimore County or governor of Maryland. In fact, Beall added, he had information that led him to believe the contrary.

Kleindienst, in a telephone interview yesterday, also confirmed the Agnew conversations, but he said he could not recall any discussion with Agnew about Skolnik by name. He said he also could not remember if Agnew was particularly anxious about the possibility that the press might unfairly link him with the probe.

On Aug. 8, one day after Agnew acknowledged he was under criminal investigation, he said at a press conference that he retained a lawyer in the early spring to deal with Beall's office because "I did not think it would be correct for me to make personal contact under the circumstances." Agnew could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Agnew's plea to a tax evasion charge and his resignation were the result of extended plea bargaining with the Justice Department and the Baltimore prosecutors. He was fined \$10,000 and placed on three years probation.

At the same time, federal officials released a 40-page exposition of the evidence against Agnew that detailed alleged instances in which Agnew had accepted payoffs during a 10-year period from engineering firms doing business in Maryland. The document contained no mention of what some of the prosecutors thought was an attempt by Agnew to obstruct the investigation, because, Beall said, his aides never had the opportunity to formally interview Kleindienst and determine Agnew's exact words. Kleindienst resigned as Attorney General April 30.

In addition, Beall said, his staff was not in agreement on whether Agnew's conversations with Kleindienst constituted an attempt to thwart the investigation. Skolnik, the leader of the prosecutorial team under Beall, argued against pressing an obstruction of justice charge, saying the evidence was weak.

Beall said he made repeated attempts in September to interview Kleindienst but the former Attorney General was out of the country much of the month.

According to Beall, Kleindienst called him twice in February to relate Agnew's complaints and to ask about the status of the investigation. Beall said he had first alerted Kleindienst to the Baltimore County investigation at a meeting Feb. 6.

He said he took that step because rumors already were sweeping the Baltimore area that Agnew was the eventual target of the probe. Beall said he wanted to assure Kleindienst that the rumors were unfounded. Agnew did not become a target of the investigation until the early summer.

Beall said he next heard from Kleindienst on Feb. 9 when Kleindienst called to say he had heard from Agnew. Kleindienst, Beall said, reported that Agnew was upset because the investigation could lead to damaging publicity linking him—and his Balti-



RICHARD KLEINDIENST
... was called three times

more County administration—to the corruption charges.

Beall said he assured Kleindienst that he was conscious of the potential harm to Agnew that could result from newspaper stories of the investigation and said he would make every effort to minimize leaks.

Kleindienst's last call to Beall, the U.S. attorney said, occurred four days later when the then Attorney General related Agnew's concern about Skolnik's role in the case and his impression that the investigation might be politically motivated.