

Agnew Benefactor: High Roller, Mystery Man

By Jules Witcover
Washington Post Staff Writer

HENDERSON, Ky.—Walter J. Dilbeck Jr., the man who is helping Spiro T. Agnew continue to live in the style to which he became accustomed as Vice President, is a Gaylord Ravenel of finance whose high rolling has made him both millionaire and mystery man.

At the age of 56, this short, stocky, mustachioed befriendder of politicians is at the apex of a latter-day Horatio Alger career that really began on a battlefield near Buchhof, Germany, on April 6, 1945. There, he singlehandedly killed about 60 German SS troops and returned home a hero.

Before then, he had been a laborer and later a time-study man at Swift and Co. in Chicago. Returning to the Evansville, Ind., area where he had grown up, young Dilbeck went into the real estate business, had his license revoked in 1953 for ethical questions raised by the Indiana Real Estate Commission, but bought and

sold property on his own and made his first big hit in the late 1950s with a sale of valuable land to a life insurance company.

He was interested in politics from the outset, running and losing for the Democratic mayoralty nomination in Evansville in 1955 and 1959. The first time, he ran as "the poor man's friend"—and demonstrated it by campaigning in local taverns and once serving his workers pheasant under glass.

He also drove a Cadillac to campaign meetings, but on foot took a white mule along with him. For all his troubles and eccentricities, he got only about 500 votes, and ran far behind the 1955 winner, Vance Hartke, now Indiana's senior senator. In 1959 he spent \$4,100 and got about half as many votes as in 1955).

Hartke became Dilbeck's fast friend and one of the first beneficiaries of his generosity in his Senate races. In 1972, when Hartke decided to run in the New Hamp-

shire presidential primary, he went to Dilbeck, and his friend contributed a total of \$107,000 in that predictably lost cause. Hartke got 3 percent of the vote, and Dilbeck later got an additional bill of \$78,000 for an unpaid bank note.

(In 1972, Hartke failed to report any of Dilbeck's massive contributions; and justified his omission by explaining that Dilbeck had acted "on his own" in the New Hampshire primary and not as part of the Hartke campaign.)

Dilbeck started out as a liberal Democrat, working for Adlai Stevenson when he was still in Chicago, but later became an unpredictable political maverick. He gave money to and manned the Washington campaign headquarters of Gov. Ronald Reagan of California in 1968, but had a falling out with Reagan over the governor's failure to enter the race earlier. "He would have beaten Nixon," Dilbeck still insists.

In 1972, after Hartke's brief folly had run its course, Dilbeck not only contributed \$300,000 to the campaign of Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey (D-Minn.), but helped recruit Texas land speculator W. T. Duncan for him. When Humphrey, like Hartke, failed, Humphrey backer Dwayne Andreas recruited Dilbeck for President Nixon, and Dilbeck in turn got Duncan to pledge Nixon \$305,000—which he later could not pay.

Dilbeck's generosity has extended beyond politics. This Christmas, as he has done for several years, he sent 35 members of his family to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for the holidays, taking over the ground floor of an entire motel. Last year he sent 60 of his friends to Europe to establish a monument in memory of his World War II experience, at a cost of \$120,000, but didn't go along because "I was busy."

In 1967, after a three-week visit to South Vietnam, he adopted four South Vietnamese children, and he

also flew there with his lawyer in 1970 to help defend a Marine from Evansville facing court-martial. He was a supporter of the anti-Castro "Cuban Crusade" in 1962, and once tried to start a housing project in Ecuador.

But he has had his troubles, too. In 1968, an Evansville radio station won a summary judgment of \$1,740 and costs from him on grounds that he failed to pay for advertising bought 11 years earlier. And in 1963 he was found guilty of reckless homicide, fined \$300 and costs and lost his driver's license for a year after a 72-year-old woman was killed when the car in which she was a passenger collided with one driven by Dilbeck.

He took a reported loss of \$300,000 owning the Louisville Colonels baseball team of the International League in 1968, and failed again in a grandiose plan in 1969 to launch a global baseball league. That one cost him

anywhere between \$800,000 and \$3 million, according to varying estimates, sometimes by Dilbeck.

For all these ups and downs, Walter Dilbeck seems a very placid man, with a quiet, gracious manner in conversation that contrast with his somewhat flamboyant dress style of Middle America mod, and the pencil mustache he wore long before mustaches were fashionable.

When he speaks of new business associate Agnew at all—and he repeatedly reminds a caller that Agnew has asked him not to, and he intends to comply—it is with deference and respect: always "Mr. Agnew."

He took a reported loss of \$300,000 owning the Louisville Colonels baseball team of the International League in 1968, and failed again in a grandiose plan in 1969 to launch a global baseball league. That one cost him