

# Richardson Helped Agnew in '73

By Jack Anderson  
and Les Whitten

Vice President Agnew was saved from jail in 1973, according to suppressed papers in the case, by Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson.

The unpublished papers describe the delicate, dramatic plea bargaining that led to Agnew's historic resignation as Vice President.

On Oct. 7, 1973, Richardson met with the Baltimore federal prosecutors, headed by U.S. Attorney George Beall. Richardson was joined for the secret Sunday session by his deputy, William Ruckelshaus, and the chief of the criminal division, Henry E. Petersen.

The eager young prosecutors from Baltimore came to the meeting determined to put Agnew in prison, even if it meant a long, divisive trial. But Richardson cautioned that a drawn-out trial would not be in the public interest.

With President Nixon already mired in the Watergate scandal, impeachment proceedings against his successor could cause a constitutional crisis, Richardson contended. There was every reason to believe, he suggested, that Agnew would hang on to his office and force Congress to undertake impeachment proceedings before he could be put on trial.

It would be better for the nation, Richardson concluded, if a deal could be arranged that would induce Agnew to step down from his high office. By the end of the meeting, Beall and his associates had come around to Richardson's view.

Next day, the opposing parties sat down in an Alexandria, Va., motel with U.S. District Judge Walter Hoffman. The negotiations were tense, sometimes acrimonious.

Agnew's attorneys offered to enter a plea of nolo contendere to tax evasion but wanted to avoid requiring Agnew to admit guilt. Hoffman responded sternly that nolo contendere was the same as a guilty plea.

The attorneys then made a strong pitch to keep Agnew out of jail. Petersen, speaking for the Justice Department, said the prosecutors would leave the sentence up to the court. The maximum possible

sentence: five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

The judge refused to indicate, in the absence of a government recommendation, what sentence he would impose. Although some progress was made, the meeting broke up without an agreement.

The following day, Oct. 9, the negotiations were resumed at the Justice Department, with Richardson in attendance.

Again, Agnew's lawyers declared they wouldn't let their client cop a plea without assurance he would not go to jail. As the talks wore on, it became clear that a settlement would depend on whether the Attorney General would recommend against imprisonment and whether the judge would agree.

According to a rough, partial transcript, the two men sparred like a pair of 17th-century diplomats. Richardson tried delicately to avoid any recommendation. But finally he said: "We would be prepared to make a recommendation..."

Judge Hoffman quickly seized upon the opening, saying: "It would be helpful because of the great national interest involved."

Richardson then put the best possible face on it. "In light of what you have said and the extraordinary national interest," he said, the government would recommend "no imprisonment."

With a sigh, the judge replied with words that made clear Agnew would not have to go to prison. "The recommendation of the Attorney General has impressed me," said the judge.

The rest is history. As the secret negotiations had determined in advance, Agnew resigned on Oct. 10 as Vice President and entered a plea of nolo contendere. Richardson recommended no prison sentence, and the judge concurred. Agnew got off with only a \$10,000 fine.

A year earlier, Agnew had agreed to run for a second term as Vice President, with the understanding that he would seek the presidency in 1976. The Watergate developments would have made him President in 1974 if he had not accepted

petty bribes from Maryland contractors and failed to report them on his tax returns.

**Washington Whirl** — In an earlier column, we accused Alex Armendaris, the government's irrepressible minority business booster, of mismanaging the taxpayers' money. We reported that he had taken subordinates on junkets, had helped friends get government contracts and had accepted gifts from the contractors. White House sources now tell us that Armendaris will be eased out as director of the Office of Minority Business Enterprise. Armendaris told us he knew of no specific plans to replace him.

— Last April, we reported that the U.S. Mint sent 16 experimental aluminum pennies to Capitol Hill for inspection, only to have them mysteriously vanish. Now we have discovered that Mint officials stamped out more than 65,000 of the curiosities during 1974 in violation of orders from Mint Director Mary Brooks.

While records on the 65,000 aluminum pennies appear loosely kept, Brooks insisted that except for those pilfered by members of Congress she can account for them "down to the last penny." The stolen pennies one day may be worth \$100,000 each.

**Make Mine A Double Gatorade:** The Wall Street Journal reports that an arbitrator recently cut back the proposed punishment a company had set for a worker because the employee drove across the firm's beautifully manicured lawn while drunk.

The arbitrator ruled, WSJ says, that the company was partly to blame because it permitted workers to imbibe at the office during holiday periods. If that decision becomes precedent, it could put the damper on private and federal offices parties this Christmas season. Booze isn't allowed on federal property (except in executive suites) but spiked punch and flasks are usually plentiful at December office affairs.