

Agnew's death rekindles sad Md. memories

By TOM STUCKEY

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Spiro T. Agnew's statehouse colleagues recall looking on the Maryland governor as an honorable and effective chief executive.

So they were shocked to learn in 1973 that federal prosecutors were accusing him of taking kickbacks from state contractors during his two years as governor.

Mr. Agnew's death yesterday from acute leukemia dredged up memories of a painful moment in Maryland history 21 years ago when he walked into a Baltimore court-

room to resign as vice president and plead no contest to a charge of income tax evasion.

The shock was so great because Mr. Agnew was elected as a symbol of suburban purity as opposed to urban machines and rural reaction, said George Callcott, professor emeritus of history at the University of Maryland at College Park.

"But he was personally on the take. That's the irony of Agnew, the symbol of cleanliness," Mr. Callcott said yesterday.

Marylanders such as Attorney General J. Joseph Curran, who was

in the legislature when Agnew was governor in 1966 and 1967, say they never picked up any hints that contractors were paying kickbacks in return for state work.

"It was a shock when we learned what he and a few of the people around him were doing," Mr. Curran said.

"I could never explain that. How he ever succumbed to that I don't know," he said.

Despite Mr. Agnew's plea and a 40-page document submitted by prosecutors detailing a long-standing scheme to collect kickbacks, the

former vice president maintained until his death that he had done nothing wrong.

But George Beall, who prosecuted the case against Mr. Agnew, said the question of guilt was settled on Oct. 10, 1973, when the vice president entered his plea in federal court in Baltimore.

"The case was not based on an isolated act," he said. "There was a pattern that was demonstrable for a long time."

Mr. Agnew's election as a Republican governor in a state then overwhelmingly Democratic was

something of a fluke.

A badly splintered Democratic Party had nominated George Mahoney, a conservative whose campaign slogan "Your house is your castle. Protect it" was viewed as a racist appeal to white voters.

Former Democratic state Sen. Julian Lapidus of Baltimore said he refused to endorse Mr. Mahoney and voted for Mr. Agnew.

"At that time, he was really the liberal candidate," Mr. Lapidus said.

Mr. Lapidus gives Mr. Agnew credit for some progressive actions

as governor, including beginning to reorganize dozens of state agencies into a cabinet form of government. Mr. Agnew also supported legislation to end racial discrimination in housing and hike school funding.

Mr. Agnew's public image began to change from political progressive to die-hard conservative after rioting broke out in Baltimore in 1968 following the death of Martin Luther King Jr.

He summoned black leaders to a public meeting and chastised them for not taking a harder stance against the riots.