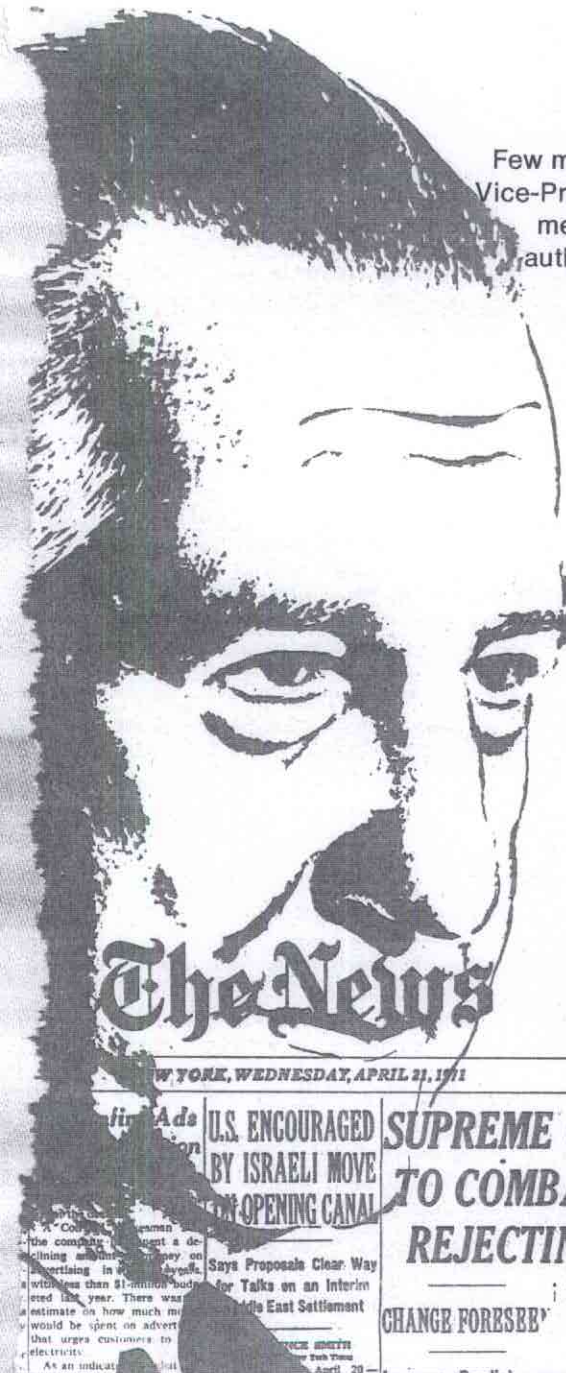


Few men know the media as well as Vice-President Agnew does. And few men know Agnew as well as this author, his ex-administrative aide

WHY AGNEW SPANKS THE PRESS SO HARD

by Robert Marsh



The News

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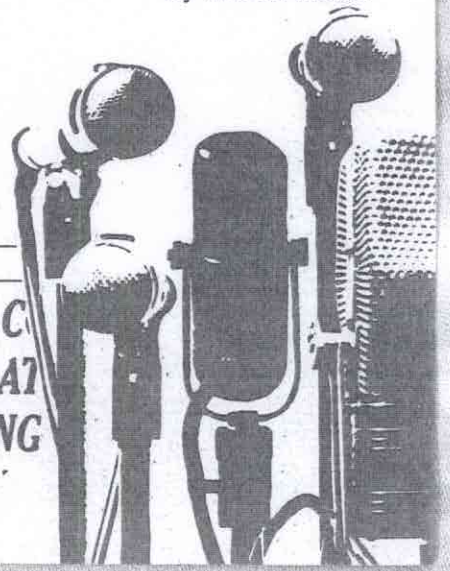
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Spiro Agnew has a love-hate relationship with the press—probably because he was spoiled when he was young. For although the relationship is unacknowledged on both sides, the political Agnew is the love child of the liberal press. Now, as Vice-President, he has become the liberal press's problem child—irascible, uncontrollable, disrespectful of his elders, unable to take advice, disobedient and ungrateful to his parents.

The press was both mother and father to Agnew the politician. Agnew got his first taste of publicity by working up the ladder of civic organizations to become president of the Kiwanis Club and president of his county parent - teacher association. He could see, as all young lawyers do, the value of such exposure to his law career and to any future interest in politics. The very first sniff, the first drag, the first speedball in the form of a headline, or shot in the arm in the form of a picture, addicted him. Now he is mainlining a three-a-day habit—with the morning press, the afternoon press, and the evening television, but at first the highs were few and hard to come by.

Agnew began to take publicity seriously when he went on the Baltimore County Zoning Appeals Board. At that time he told a friend that the press was extremely important to a politician in a minority party; he began to discover that strong words, catchy phrases, name - calling, and political infighting were the elements that captured space and headlines.

His campaign to become county executive was designed around his analysis of the local press, specifi-

cally the *Sun* papers of Baltimore. Since Agnew's opponent, Mike Birmingham, was boss of the Democratic machine, it was a foregone conclusion that the three dailies would endorse Agnew — they had been attacking the machine for years. To ensure that endorsement, Agnew devised a platform to appeal specifically to the newspapers. It included some ideas for improving the tax situation and industrial development and it supported public accommodations legislation to eliminate racial segregation in public places. Dutch Moore, his administrative assistant, recalled in an interview Agnew's concern with pinball machines:

"One of those things that Ted early in the game picked up was the fact that the *Sun* papers' editorial staff would write an editorial on pinballs on every day in the week if he could just give them some excuse."

Agnew's term as county executive amounted to one long public relations campaign. These were Agnew's early, permissive years with the press, when the newspapers were sustaining and supportive. Thinking, or at least hoping, that they had the kind of public official they had been looking for over the past decade, the press was happy to be manipulated hoping that the result would be good government. For Agnew, with the press responding so willingly to his manipulation, there grew up an expectancy that things would always be that way.

Agnew began probing the working reporters to determine what kinds of relationships he could establish with them. The newspaper reporters concerned him more than those from

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the television and radio stations. Television reporters normally would ask him a prearranged question and pull back to allow the cameras to film what he had to say. Or they would ask him to read a portion of a statement into the cameras.

The possibilities of television as a medium of publicity — propaganda, actually—excited him, but it was the printed press that put him in awe. Newspaper reporters worked up a story, filled in background, sought out other sources and opinions. He had less control over his statements in print than he had on TV. So he courted the print reporters seriously, called them in for chats, tried out ideas on them, and attempted to learn in advance what the press reactions to his moves would be.

"He took the position . . . as far as the use of television, that it was the best free advertisement he could possibly get," said Scott Moore (brother of Dutch), Agnew's county solicitor and closest personal friend.

"He said you could always wait until the last months prior to an election and pay for the television, pay for the radio and you couldn't get anywhere near the amount of coverage that you would if you just worked at it full time, all the time, and he did work at it."

Agnew made a little discovery that he parlayed into a full-fledged technique. He noticed that whenever a television reporter and cameraman came to him and taped anything, at least some part of it invariably appeared on the screen. This was not true of a newspaper reporter's interview, which might or might not lead to a story, but television crews, lug-

ging their heavy equipment or hauling it on hand trucks, always had some result of their labor on the supertime news shows. Agnew's tall, straight, superbly attired figure was ideal for television. His command of facts and figures was impressive. His willingness to continue a controversy or create a new one made him an interesting gamble on even a dull news day, and his speech style was as vitriolic then as it is now.

The consideration Agnew extended to the press was also designed to win the favor of reporters, and it tells something about Agnew's cynicism that he always regarded favorable stories as having been the result of his solicitousness rather than honest, independent appraisals by the newsmen. In the course of one running feud between Agnew and a county councilman, the *Sun's* county reporter Ben Orrick would contact either Agnew or Scott Moore each time the councilman let go a new salvo directed at Agnew. Both Agnew and Moore believed that Orrick was favoring them with the tips so that Agnew could balance the attack with his own rebuttal. It would not fit their view of the press to believe that in all such controversies a *Sun* reporter would attempt to wrap up both sides of the story simultaneously if he could.

Agnew also began the practice of meeting for lunch with editorial writers from the *Sun* papers and the *Baltimore News - Post*. This practice is not uncommon and can be mutually beneficial to both parties, giving the writers a chance to get some first-hand understanding of administration policy, which, in itself, is benefi-

cial to the politician whose actions are scrutinized in editorials. But Agnew looked on the papers as his supporters, no different in kind than any others, and he seemed to expect unwavering loyalty, rather than a re-examination on each issue that came along.

This is how Dutch Moore recalls those meetings: "You know he worked very hard to establish a good press relationship. . . . He frequently would try things on them to see what their reactions would be.

"I think if he saw that they were totally against it, he would drop it immediately. If he saw that they had no real faults about it one way or the other, he'd act, depending upon how important he thought it may be to the county. And if they were really in favor of it . . . he'd push the thing . . ."

And here is how Scott Moore saw it: "The relationship with the media . . . I thought was just unbelievable . . . In the way he managed them. I think it is so ironic, looking back, the way the newspapers have turned against him, particularly the ones he had eating out of his hands for years.

"I'm not saying that there was anything really improper about it, but he would kind of use them in some respects. He would want to find out if it was a good political position to be in, and he knew if they liked it and they were consulted first—and they like the idea of being consulted by a county executive—that there would be good editorials to follow. And, brother, the proof is in the pudding! Just look at the editorials about Agnew in the period of four years that he was in there. They just

didn't happen in any way, shape, or form. He fostered it—he put the bait out there and they took it."

One aide recalls that Agnew threw himself into the issue of taxes after returning from a luncheon during which Edgar Jones of the *Sun* had told him to "make a splash" about taxes. Shortly after he took office, Agnew learned of the editorial interest in urban renewal. "Make it our program," he told his staff, "the *Sun* papers will eat it up."

Agnew's day - to - day relationship with the reporters, on the other hand, soured for him rather quickly. Generally, they were easy on him but when some issues arose dealing with the integrity of Agnew's administration, the reporters hit him hard and Agnew was both angry and perplexed. To him, the reporters were employees of organizations that had supported him politically and hence adverse stories were out of line. He would attempt to stop such stories ahead of time, or get them toned down, by calling the editors of the newspapers. Edgar Jones was the recipient of many of those calls:

"His feeling was, 'Why is the *Sun* printing these stories? They're for me; they want to see me become governor, so why do they print these stories?' Well, from our point of view, you print news because it's news . . .

"I would have explained to him that the editorial department has simply no connection with the news department—no control. We don't want them to tell us how to write editorials and they don't want us to tell them how to write news stories.

" . . . he feels that the press, in

effect, chooses up sides and that the sides should be helping the government, and [now], I think, helping the Nixon administration. In this case, he is part of the Nixon administration and the Nixon administration is trying to do good things. Therefore, the press should be helping and not criticizing."

When he couldn't get satisfaction from reporters or editorial writers, and sometimes even when he did, Agnew turned to the device of writing letters to the editor. The letters were frequent and lengthy and often turned on picayune points, but they were printed. That counted.

As time went on during his county administration, Agnew grew more, not less, concerned with the press. He paid attention to the details of news coverage. He would ask television reporters and cameramen for their opinions on his presentation and technique before the cameras. He listened to their advice carefully and mastered the medium with the help of their friendly criticism. Dutch Moore particularly recalls Agnew's concerns with the language of stories that appeared about him:

"... many a time we'd say 'Don't get upset about that' or that it's not important in the over-all article. And he'd say 'Well, it's me, not you. It does make a difference as to who that particular word may be written about, or that sentence may be talking about.'"

Agnew was not the product of a political machine or an effective political party. What he had gained, he believed, came from his careful ma-

nipulation of the press, which meant the press was responsible for everything he had in his life—his success up to that time, his community status, a reasonable income. Is it any wonder that he worried when he painfully learned that he could not control those who had given him everything and, by extension, could take everything away?

Agnew's sweep from governor to potential vice-presidential candidate was so rapid that the images of him overlap. From the moment of his victory (as governor of Maryland), he savored the taste of national publicity. In fact, on a good day there could be as many as 25 or 30 newsmen at the governor's command, and the reporter asking to see him privately might just as likely be from the *New York Times* as from the *Baltimore Sun*, for it was hardly two months after his inauguration that he thrust himself into the national search for a Republican presidential candidate.

The spring of 1968 brought several events that were to change Agnew's attitude toward the press significantly. First came an excruciating debacle over the presidential candidacy of Nelson Rockefeller. In early March, Agnew arranged to have a color television set installed in his own conference room so that he could watch Rockefeller announce his candidacy. Agnew had been one of the first supporters of Rockefeller on this most recent presidential ground and headed a national Rockefeller for President Committee. He invited the State House reporters in to watch him watching the announcement. There was a sense of

history about the moment. Rockefeller might be President. Who knew for what important position Agnew, his early and strong supporter, might be tapped? Then, instead of the expected, there was a shocking surprise. To Agnew's dismay and embarrassment, Rockefeller announced he would not run. He had not bothered to inform Agnew of his decision, an omission that could scarcely be explained away to the reporters. The conclusion seemed to be obvious; Agnew really did not figure in Rocky's plans. It was a humiliating and depressing experience.

Two weeks later the Baltimore riot exploded. Agnew was now getting more national publicity than he could handle — and all bad. One might have thought that he would, therefore, have excluded the press from his post-riot meeting with the black leaders, in order to give his national image a rest. However, the track Agnew runs on is always one-way, and the way is forward. The meeting went on. Agnew's excellent television presence, his attention to colorful phrases and short, snappy thoughts that fit so well the television news time sequences, his sense of drama, importance, and authority, all these elements were rolled up in one smashing virtuoso performance. He continued to insist he had done the right thing even after all those black leaders had stormed in anguish from the room.

Suddenly, despite the hostility of the press, there was an outpouring of telegrams, phone calls, and letters from all over the state, and from other states as well. He knew he was right; now from everywhere there

were thousands of others who said he was right, and kept saying it even after the editorials and news magazines and white clergymen and blacks all over America shouted out how wrong he was. Despite that condemnation from all the articulate sources that ought to have counted, here was this outpouring from people who were thinking for themselves and coming to the same conclusion that he did; and at the same time coming to the conclusion that he was one hell of a guy.

He had always relied on helping hands — the financial support of his father even after his marriage; the jobs that came through the friends of his father; the jobs and advice from a fatherly judge; the paternal protection of a powerful newspaper. The days following his lecture to the black leaders were like leaving home. It was marvelous and a fulfilling restoration for someone who had just suffered the rejection, the slap in the face, delivered by the governor of New York whose favor he had so fervently courted.

The press could sit back and make its judgments. He did not need its advice, only its news columns. This was the final thing that Agnew learned about the press, something that was too elemental for him to believe in Baltimore County; a newspaper might hate him on its editorial pages and still give him space in the news columns.

As Vice-President, Agnew gets all of the space he should, which means that anytime he says something, the press will print it at a length determined by their professional judgment as to its importance and interest. To

that is added all the extra space the liberal press tends to give to those it opposes, in order to avoid the charge that it discriminates anywhere but on the editorial page. Liberal reporters and news editors add to the coverage even more because, cynics though they are, they labor in the belief that the more exposure is given to the ills of society, the more likely is the citizenry to turn to something better. Finally, there is the detailed coverage the press always gives to those who attack it directly, uneasily aware that it must be a platform for its own critics because there is no other platform.

For all of the above reasons, the press, caught in its own self-conscious power, compulsively gives more and more space to Agnew while they enjoy him less. It is the press's special weakness and it can do nothing about it. If Agnew is suppressed, he can claim that his charges are true.

Agnew knows all of these things about the press, and he goes after it as a jujitsu artist would, flipping, throwing, pinning, not through his own strength (a slight, 90 - pound woman can throw a six-foot man, the jujitsu books claim), but by using the press's own stance, its own momentum and weight, to its own disadvantage. Thus when Agnew claimed that Averell Harriman sold out Poland to Stalin for two riding horses, the *Washington Post* found the charge so absurd it devoted nearly its entire editorial page to the matter.

Agnew has not figured out anything new, but most effective politi-

cians or government officials would feel demeaned by such tactics of publicity. Nor would they want to use up press and public attention, valuable assets that they are, on self-made issues, unprovoked attacks, and aimless rattling around the body politic. On the other hand, real crooks cannot use Agnew's attention - getting devices. The press spots them and draws a line on them. The other run-of-the-mill sorts simply don't have the gall to do what Agnew does.

Agnew has now reached the high ground in his strategy for self-promotion; press criticism has become beneficial to him. The people he speaks to are happy to know that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and the *Herald* in Rutland, Vt., oppose what he says. What he says is enriched when it rankles the press and infuriates his detractors. Agnew no longer has to give the press any urban renewal issues to "eat up." He has the press just where he wants it.

"You know," said Scott Moore, "they criticized him when he ran for Vice-President—became Vice-President—about how green he was and so forth and so on. This is an absolute untruth. This guy had six years of experience before those television cameras before he was ever mentioned for Vice-President, and there was nobody in the state of Maryland that was on television more than Agnew in that six-year period. And if anybody could ever learn—and he could learn and was pretty polished at television—it was Agnew . . . he had a lot of time on that subject." ♣