

We've studied his way  
of talking. Now let's consider  
the way he sees.

## Spiro

"It seems fair to appraise Spiro Agnew's attacks on network newscasters as more a symptom than a cause of popular discontent."—Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Survey of Broadcast Journalism

"... Whoever obtains power in times of national humiliation and defeat is apt to express and intensify the persecution manias which that atmosphere develops in any people."—Thurman Arnold, "The Folklore of Capitalism"

The Vice President's notorious Des Moines assault on TV news—

The audience of seventy million Americans gathered to hear the President... was inherited by a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed... their hostility to what he had to say... The views of the majority of this fraternity do not—and I repeat, not—represent the views of America... Perhaps it is time that the networks were made more responsive to the views of the nation... Now I want to make myself perfectly clear. I'm not asking for Government censorship... —stirred up great alarm, and naturally so, for here was a coarse and blatant attack upon the very idea of a free press or a free tube, whichever. And what was perfectly clear, in addition to the picture that the networks carried of the Vice President in Iowa, was the primitive and unmistakable menace in Mr. Agnew's language. His effort to disclaim any intent to censor was obvious bunk. "When the criticism is directed by the second highest ranking elected official in the nation's Government," as commentator Joseph McCaffrey put it, "there is a fine, if not indiscernible line between criticism and censorship." So alarm was justified, and I could share in it and in the widespread dismay at the character of the Vice President's language. Yet, it was not his language that finally left me apprehensive.

What left me wondering then and later was not this man's much-studied way of saying things but



BY FRANK TRIPPETT LOOK SENIOR EDITOR

his peculiar way of seeing things. The peculiarities of Mr. Agnew's vision have been much too little examined, and I come forward here to help fill this gap.

Mr. Agnew sees things in a very special way that I find intriguing and instructive. What he sees on the television news is but a single example. There he sees chronic hostility in the reporting and commentary wherein I tend to see a seldom interrupted struggle of blandness against fatuousness.

Economic vistas, to take another example, unfold in a special way in Mr. Agnew's vision. "The rise in prices," he saw in the fall of 1970, "has been definitely curbed." To my eyes, prices still seemed to be rising. In broader terms, Mr. Agnew has testified that he sees vast improvements in the national economy under the Administration of Richard Nixon. Now, this does not raise still another question about Mr. Agnew's controversial rhetoric. This raises a question about his vision. It is his mode of perception that deserves more analysis. Once Mr. Agnew's special mode of vision is understood, his rhetoric becomes more comprehensible. What he says, after all, must flow from what he sees.

Many Americans scanning their nation see a plethora of evils, and the catalogue of these is familiar. There are poverty and racism and

militarism and unemployment and decrepit cities and runaway technology and hunger and pollution, to reiterate a few. To some Americans, it seems self-evident that we must focus steadily upon such evils if we are to remedy them. This attitude is as elementary as that of a loving parent who realizes that he must see and concentrate on the ills that a child suffers if they are to be remedied.

The Vice President, however, does not see it this way. In fact, he regards it as "masochistic" to see the evils that exist in this country. Mr. Agnew has made his witness on this point over and over.

Not long after his inaugural, the Vice President made a springtime visit to Oklahoma. There he told a gathering of fellow Republicans: "It is time to end this masochistic binge—this senseless whining over what's wrong with America!"

A few months later in New Orleans came Mr. Agnew's celebrated speech attacking "impudent snobs." That phrase tended to stick in everybody's mind more vividly than the sentence in which it occurred. The sentence follows: "A spirit of national masochism prevails, encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals."

Soon after that, Mr. Agnew went to Mississippi and attacked "liberal intellectuals" who criticized the national leadership. He said:

"They have a masochistic compulsion to destroy their country's strength whether or not [it] is exercised constructively."

Just this year, of course, Mr. Agnew vented his displeasure over the doubts expressed in the news media that the invasion of Laos had been entirely successful. This, too—these doubts—he called "masochism" that would "destroy us as a nation."

On the face of it, the allegation (or diagnosis) of masochism is an uncommon charge for a leader to level again and again at Americans who simply see certain evils in the society and focus upon them with the hope of remedy in mind. How would Mr. Agnew address a loving parent observing and discussing potentially lethal ailments in a child? Granted consistency in his way of seeing this situation, he would be obliged to say:

"It is time to end this masochistic binge—this senseless whining over what's wrong with your child!"

What is, in any event, perfectly clear from his insistent reiteration is that this is how Mr. Agnew sees many critics of the American society. If we see poverty and pollution, in other words, the victim of these evils is supposed to cause us pain. As masochists, however, we experience this pain as pleasure. Because we are masochists, therefore, we tend to see poverty and pollution over and over because each time it brings us pain and hence pleasure.

Mr. Agnew, obviously, sees not a sick society but simply sick critics. It may be that by reiteration he hopes to make the critics feel sick or encourage uncritical Americans to regard them as sick. This technique is one that Mr. Agnew himself has discussed, suggesting, in fact, that the critics themselves were employing it. He said:

"If critics repeat often enough that a society is sick, then some easily frightened members of that healthy society are going to get a

little green around the gills. Then others, observing these, will wonder whether they're sick too. Men in positions of power who keep bewailing our outcast state could cause the condition they profess to see."

I assume that Mr. Agnew acts on his own insights. This accounts for the way he has elected to appeal to those Americans who cannot bring themselves to look coolly and squarely at what is happening in the country. Mr. Agnew offers them a comforting concept: Those fellow countrymen who keep forcing unpleasant information upon them are sick. The favorable popular response to Mr. Agnew suggests the existence of many Americans who are susceptible to this kind of comfort.

I suspect that Americans almost always respond to the accumulation of hideous conditions in the society with pain, but I question that many of us masochistically translate it into pleasure. Most of us seek to alleviate the pain in two entirely human ways, some by actively seeking a solution to the problem, others simply by closing their eyes to the source of it.

This latter course, common in individuals or in groups, arises not from sloth or indifference but out of a more complex psychological defense instinct. Among many, the mere acknowledgement of certain hideous conditions tends to present a disturbing challenge to their vision of what America is like. These defend themselves simply with an eyes-closed denial of the disturbing information.

Lately, of course, a widely cherished concept of America has been radically challenged and disturbed by accumulating events and conditions, all smashing into the national consciousness for two straight decades. Information about such things is received instinctively as an attack by Americans who tend to take their personal identity from some cherished notion of the country. That old image has been taking a battering, of course.

Thinking of ourselves as a generous people, we are being forced to see that we perpetuate vast hunger and poverty amidst unprecedented affluence.

Thinking of ourselves as a tolerant people, we are being forced to acknowledge that we have structured racism into the fabric of our very institutions.

A self-proclaimed just people, we are forced to see ourselves crushing the dissenting young with clubs and guns. Many prefer to redefine justice rather than acknowledge the brutal injustices committed at Kent State and Jackson State.

We are fond of thinking of ourselves as individualistic, yet are being compelled to see the individual increasingly submerged in the vast and impersonal organizations of the technology.

Liberty- and privacy-loving, in our fond self-image, we are being forced to recognize ourselves as the acquiescent authors of widespread governmental spying on citizens, of massive illegal arrests, of the preventive-detention concept of imprisoning people not for something done but for what might be done, of direct governmental attacks on the free press. Dr. Frank Stanton has to promise to go to jail if need be to protect CBS from the intimidating excursion of a congressional committee, and the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have to go to court to secure elementary First Amendment rights to print news without prior censorship.

We have supposed ourselves to be a people in love with the land, too, but now are discovering that in truth we have been ravagers of the land and poisoners of the waters and the very air we breathe.

We have been, or have thought of ourselves, as the great stewards of peace. Now for years we have witnessed ourselves as the architects of a veritably incomprehensible war in Southeast Asia.

Finally, America has ever nursed the dream of itself as invincible. But now, to encounter an almost impregnable resistance to a new image-crushing truth, comes the

very simple and unmistakable fact of looming defeat in Vietnam.

It is easy to see across the land an enormous resistance to such harsh and fresh truths about ourselves. To many Americans, such truths smack of humiliation as well as defeat. And as the late Thurman Arnold perceptively wrote, those who come to power in times of humiliation and defeat tend to express and intensify the resulting popular persecution manias.

Mr. Agnew comes before us as a man whose peculiar way of seeing things appeals to those Americans who are impelled to avoid rather than confront this assortment of unpleasant truths.

Actually, as LOOK Editor William B. Arthur said in a recent speech to Sigma Delta Chi, Mr. Agnew and the Administration are not merely at war with the press and television. They are at war with the truth itself. And the ultimate danger is not the direct effect that they may have on American journalism, which is likely in the long run to be slight, but the effect that they have upon the willingness and capacity of the people to see their society as it is.

What it is useful to see, because of his role, is the way Mr. Agnew sees, the peculiar personal vision that he invites the American people to share. His way of seeing the press and TV is merely a small part of it. The Vice President tends to see all people with views divergent to his in either one of three ways. He sees them as sick, or he sees them as enemies—or he sees them as loathsome objects. What he says does, of course, flow from what he sees. And it is his vision of many fellow human beings as loathsome objects that spawns the rhetoric of loathing. Mr. Agnew's critics, however, have spent too much energy analyzing the rhetoric and too little grasping the vision that produces it.

Mr. Agnew sees Democrats complaining about inflation as "germs complaining about disease," and he sees some "totalitarian ptomaine dispensed by

those who disparage our system," and a "perverted nationwide college competition for violence." He sees faculties and students in some "catatonic trance." He is forever Dr. Agnew in diagnostics with an eye out for loathsome infestations. He variously describes human beings of divergent views as "garbage" or "rotten apples" or, collectively, as a "cancer."

The striking and fearful thing is not the rhetoric, not the ugly name-calling, but the remedial ideas to which his visions impel him. Over and over again, when Mr. Agnew sees human beings as loathsome objects, his instinct is to reach for and commend some terminal way of dealing with them.

Hence when some demonstrators from the opposition appeared at one of his political rallies in Illinois, Mr. Agnew declared that it was "time to sweep that kind of garbage out of our society."

The prior year, when Mr. Agnew scrutinized America's young dissenters, he said: "We can . . . afford to separate them from our society—with no more regret than we should feel over discarding rotten apples from a barrel."

In Houston in 1970, Mr. Agnew looked upon campus activists generally and said: "It is my honest opinion that this hard core of faculty and students should be identified and dismissed from the otherwise healthy body of the college community lest they, like a cancer, destroy it."

Repeatedly and consistently, when Dr. Agnew sees the loathsome political opposition he is impelled to think in terms of eradication or extermination. What he has in mind for American television—the termination not of its existence nor of his frequent appearance on it but merely of its right to criticize freely—is mild in comparison with what, by his own testimony, he sees as the way to deal with human beings holding views he detests. To sweep out the "garbage," to pluck out the "rotten apples," to cut out the "cancer"—this kind of vision occurs only in a man who is scarcely attuned to the American idea of tolerance.