

Watching Spiro: What Makes Him Tick

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Reviewed by
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After four years in office, the name of Spiro T. Agnew has become not only a household word but a symbol whose invocation can touch off a heated discussion in almost any gathering in America. Yet, as a personality, the Vice President remains as remote from the public as though he were living in the obscurity to which we sentenced most of his predecessors.

This reflection is the aftermath of plowing (I use the word advisedly) through three books devoted to Mr. Agnew and a fourth on the

SPIRO AGNEW'S AMERICA. By Theo Lippman Jr.
(Norton, 256 pp., \$7.95)

WHIT KNIGHT: The Rise of Spiro Agnew.
By Jules Whitcover.
(Random House, 463 pp., \$10)

AMERICAN ROULETTE: The History and Dilemma of the Vice Presidency. By Donn'd Young.
Introduced by Senator Birch Bayh.
(Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 433 pp., \$7.95)

THE IMPUDENT SNOBS: Agnew vs. the Intellectual Establishment. By John R. Coyne Jr.
(Arlington House, 524 pp., illustrated, \$8.95)

vice presidency which has been revised to include, among other things, a chapter on his term in office. For this situation, I do not fault the intentions of the authors. They tried and they have crammed their books with more facts than I can digest or that I really care to digest.

Nevertheless, at the end

of several nights of reading I only know that Mr. Agnew was elected governor of Maryland because liberals flocked to his banner in opposition to a segregationist Democratic candidate; that his switch to Richard M. Nixon from Nelson Rockefeller was an important factor in Mr. Nixon's drive for the Republican nomination;

that his selection as the vice presidential candidate was a startling surprise provoking the query "Spiro who?" that he referred on one occasion to "Polacks" and on another occasion to a "fat Jap"; that he has hit a couple of people with golf balls and another with a tennis ball; and that he fights with the press and the "impudent snobs" of the intellectual establishment. All of this has advanced my knowledge to the stage where it was before I read the books.

Of course, the books include an abundance of biographical details, many of which I did not know and all of which I intend to forget promptly. They are accumulative rather than enriching and while they give me more to chew on, they somehow lack flavor. I still wind up asking myself: "What is that man really like?"

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LEISURE

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BOOKS, From B1

It could be that Spiro Agnew has a bland personality but this is a doubtful proposition at best. Men do not arise to such prominence if they are made only of Styrofoam. It could be that Mr. Agnew has so irritated the intellectual establishment that writers will not "give him a break," but again, this is a dubious proposition. John R. Coyne Jr., a former Agnew staffer and

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an avowed conservative, has produced the most bloodless book of the three.

The more likely explanation is that Mr. Agnew is being regarded as an issue rather than as a person. He has become the vehicle for a debate rather than the subject himself of a debate. The impact upon the country has been made by his words and not by his personality. This is an unhappy state for a man who is involved in the most personal of all professions—politics.

To Jules Witcover, the controlling issue raised by Agnew is polarization in society.

"What, it was legitimate now to ask, if Spiro Agnew were to become President tomorrow?" Witcover says. "The nature of his conduct as Vice President and the acquiescence in that conduct by his President, most likely would plunge the nation into a period of bickering and disruption that would make the recent past seem by contrast an era of good feeling."

Witcover is highly critical of President Nixon for using Mr. Agnew as a "political bludgeon." He suggests that serious thought be given to a number of proposals which would accord the office of the vice presidency substantive, rather than partisan, tasks. One of his most provocative thoughts is that the Vice President be made head of a major cabinet agency.

Theo Lippman sees Spiro Agnew as the embodiment of the politics of suburbia—an arena in which he believes the Republicans have an edge over the Democrats. He believes that we are going to see more Agnews on the national scene—"men raised in one-class, one-race neighborhoods; politically trained in nearly one-class, one-race communities; elected to state offices, then national offices, by a suburban bloc that is not only one-class and one-race but appears to be developing an anti-urban attitude in political matters..."

The basic issues which give suburbia a sense of political identity are those which Lippman character-

izes as "intra-metropolitan." These include revenue sharing, crime school busing and open housing.

"Significantly, on every one of these issues the Nixon-Agnew position has been conservative and pro-suburb," he says. "To a degree, the 1968 election campaign by the Republicans involved a *de facto* suburban strategy."

Neither Witcover nor Lippman devotes large sections of his book to philosophical reflections or political analysis, however. Generally speaking, they have produced biographies of the Vice President. John R. Coyne Jr. has written a totally different work—a defense of Agnew in his battle against the "intellectual establishment" of journalists and academics. He makes no secret of his partisan leanings.

"Agnew rendered a salutary service in taking on the intellectual establishment," Coyne states. "It was something that had to be done and he did it effectively. For years matters such as bias in the national media simply weren't discussed. Now they're out in the open, and the media are taking the charges seriously."

Coyne's effort, which seems designed to furnish Agnew partisans with ammunition in their battle against "impudent snobs," supplies us with something of a literary curiosity—a non-academic book in which the appendix is more than twice as long as the text. This results from his presentation of 94 Agnew speeches as transcribed from tapes.

To Donald Young, Spiro T. Agnew supplies more evidence to back his thesis that Americans should pay more attention to vice presidential nominations.

"Agnew's message was as direct as the man himself," Young writes. "Americans were forgetting the traditional values: Patriotism was out of fashion. Symbols of authority—parents, government officials, educators—no longer commanded respect; in fact, some of them encouraged disrespect for authority and order. It was fair enough for a vice president to address such problems, but his decision to do

so in a partisan way led to his advocacy of polarization, a concept alien to democratic government."

Young's book, which is prefaced with an introduction by Sen. Birch Bayh, also carries updated material on the Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey vice presidencies but his basic message remains the same as it was when first issued in 1965—we are far too care-

less in the manner in which we select our vice presidents.

The fact that so many books can appear at one time on the Vice President and the vice presidency is a measurement of Mr. Agnew's impact upon the nation. In the past, about the

best a man in his office could expect was a routine campaign biography and a few satirical skits in vaudeville or musical revues. Now he is under examination by serious writers who normally would disdain dedicating time to anyone in a position traditionally so insignificant.

nificant.

And yet, in a sense, Mr. Agnew still suffers from anonymity. The facts are presented; the words are presented. But somehow the picture of a flesh-and-blood man does not emerge. It is Agnewism and not Agnew who occupies the stage.