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Rallying Point for the Frustrated



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Vice-President Agnew appears to enjoy a moment during a June campaign speech before Jaycees in Atlanta.

Agnew Feels He's a Rallying Point for Frustrated

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By Lou Cannon
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Vice President Spiro Agnew, looking back on his angry rhetoric of the past from the happy summit of his present low-keyed campaign, believes that he has served as a "rallying point" for the frustrations of America.

"Although my speeches in some areas have been received as divisive and provocative and that sort of thing, the basic result has been the letting off of a tremendous head of steam and frustration that had built up in a lot of people who think the way I do and have not been able to see those opinions refined, and expressed the way I express them," Agnew said.

The Vice President gave his views in a wide-ranging interview with The Washington Post conducted in his spacious second-floor executive office building headquarters.

In the hour-long interview, Agnew expressed satisfaction with his present rhetoric, concern about the way it has been received in the press and delight about his dieting, which he said had now reduced his weight to a 10-year low of 187.

Some of the interview dealt with Agnew's daily routine and leisure-time activities — "I'm average at golf and tennis, maybe a little better at tennis because I've been playing longer" — but much of it focused on Agnew's continuing criticism of the media, his perceptions of the current campaign and his vision of the country.

"I guess when you say what is my vision for America, it's to continue to be

the country that became the envy of the world in the short space of 196 years and to go forward with the same programs, trying to perfect and eliminate the poor results, but always being appreciative that it has been an overall successful society and not one that we should attempt drastic reforms of in our institutions when a simple adjustment . . . is indicated," Agnew said.

Agnew, who has repeatedly emphasized during two weeks of campaigning that he has changed his campaign style without altering his political positions, believes that far too much attention has been paid to social critics.

"The tendency to look to society for individual fault all the time is distressing," Agnew said. "Why should we worry about what is wrong with a system when a group of individuals have clearly performed in an aberrational fashion? The Altica thing for example. Why shouldn't we always bear in mind that we were dealing with two and three-time losers who committed serious felonies and who had already demonstrated their inability to be socially compatible with a normal society, rather than simply report what their criticisms of our society were."

"That has never been emphasized. You go get the records of the people who led the Altica revolt and you'll find out they've been malcontents and criminals for considerable time. I don't think those people's opinions should . . . be presented in the same manner as the opinions of people who try to serve society. So we've got to get away from this basic masochism of looking

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for any kind of dissident opinion and dignifying it."

The Vice President spoke against a background of military swords presented him by the Army and Air Force academies, a plaque honoring him in the words of Herbert Hoover as "the uncommon man" and a glowering portrait of Andrew Jackson.

Like President Jackson, who sponsored his own party press to rebut critics, Agnew is still far from delighted with the press he has received.

"I noticed one day last week one reporter (James Wooten in The New York Times) said I was returning to the old Agnew and out of the same speech came a report (a column by David S. Broder in The Washington Post) that I was putting people to sleep," Agnew said. "So I guess it's hard sometimes. It's a subjective evaluation by the reporter as to whether you're being boring or inflammatory."

The Vice President was asked which evaluation he preferred.

Doesn't Like Either

"Well, neither, if you want the true answer," Agnew replied. "I don't like either one of them. No public speaker likes to be told he's putting his audiences to sleep. And on the other hand I've had such a terrible amount of trouble with what I considered to be, in 1970, a really improper analysis of what I was saying. . . . The things that I said compared with the things that McGovern is saying today are really quite placid."

Agnew believes the press is biased by nature, a point he made last week in a St. Louis press conference, repeated Wednesday on the campaign plane returning to Washington, and reiterated Thursday in the interview.

The Vice President contends that the difficulties he has had are the same faced by "anyone who is heavily reported taking positions the majority of the media disagree with individually."

"Everyone's got his own feelings," says Agnew, "and you can't be subjected to a political campaign and thrown into close contact with a political candidate without liking him or disliking him to some extent. And if you do, your bias comes into effect personally, it comes into effect about whether you agree with what he's doing, whether you approve of what he's saying."

"Then the bias is compounded by going to a very strong publication, or a network, that has its own ideas editorially and doesn't hesitate to express them. Then that's compounded by the positioning of the article, by what's cut out of it by the editor, by how it's displayed and many other factors. I don't think we can ever change that. And I don't think we should. I'm not asking

for objectivity, I'm asking for balance, that's all. Ideally, in my judgment, each publication would strive for having some people on its staff who are believers in other points of view."

Shift in Nature

The nature of Agnew's criticism of the press has shifted somewhat during the past two years. He no longer charges that the press is "distorting" what he says but instead complains that it is printing "truncated" accounts of his long, statistical recitations of Nixon administration accomplishments. Agnew believes that statistics are the best measure of the administration.

"They're a lot more valuable than the generalized, high-flung rhetoric of 'we are for you because you can tell by the way our hearts are we're for you,'" says Agnew.

On the campaign trail, the Vice President remains wary of the press and sometimes unmindful of its professional requirements. He irritated a long-waiting group of Chicago reporters Tuesday when he arrived at the airport late from a Senate vote and declined to make himself available at the press enclosure.

Instead, Agnew simply pointed at his watch and entered a waiting limousine which sped him to a downtown hotel.

An Agnew associate says: "Basically, Agnew has neither forgiven nor forgotten his difficulties in the 1968 campaign—the critical editorials, the 'fat Jap' affair and all the rest. He can take the gaff ideologically but he didn't like being portrayed as a clown, a fool or a buffoon. He's very proud of the distance he's come and he doesn't like to be thought of that way."

The Agnew pride reflects itself in sensitivity to what he considers personal insults. He also frets about any presumed acts of rudeness on his own part.

Victor Gold, the vice presidential press secretary, recalls a time when Agnew popped a gum drop into his mouth and immediately afterward encountered CBS reporter Marvin Kalb.

According to Gold, Agnew didn't want to speak while he was chewing the gum drop and merely nodded to Kalb. Afterward, Agnew was distressed that he had given the appearance of rudeness and called in Kalb for an interview.

Agnew is also sensitive, though less serious, about his golf game. He claims a handicap that ranges from 16 to 20 strokes and he says he has twice shot rounds of 83.

Warms Up With Jokes

Invariably, Agnew uses golf jokes as warmups for his campaign audiences ("yesterday I shot 92 — which really isn't bad when you consider that less than half of them required first aid"), but he plays tennis more often, preferring it for physical exercise. He also works out three minutes each morning with the exercise wheel, a device he likes so much that he once recommended it to California Gov. Ronald Reagan.

The Vice President does not smoke but he likes a highball or two before dinner and sometimes drinks wine with his meal. His favorite foods are lobster and Italian meals, but he has resisted heavy eating recently in a thus-far successful effort to keep his weight below 190.

Agnew says that his temperament fluctuates during the campaign but he adds that "I have probably less turmoil in this campaign than any other I've ever been in."

The Vice President has been pursuing a relatively leisurely schedule but he attributes his mood largely to his newfound campaign approach.

"I'm intentionally maintaining a different style, which doesn't require me to be a fired-up evangelist every minute," says Agnew. ". . . There is a self-generating excitement when you're giving a speech and you're really trying to bang it out. It's self-generating and carries you to different levels of emotional involvement. (If) you stir yourself up over issues and then go out and try to project a very hard-hitting attack, it has an effect on you emotionally, too. Whereas if you're playing it low key, it's not as stimulative as doing a big fired-up stump speech."

According to one story current in the administration, Agnew is so taken with his new style that he has turned down suggestions that he answer anti-administration attacks by Democratic vice-presidential nominee Sargent Shriver with some attacks of his own. Such attacks, Agnew reportedly replied, would undermine his statesman-like role.

In 1968 the Nixon campaign staff kept close tabs on Agnew and various Nixon aides, notably attorney John Sears, traveled with him during the campaign. This time there is no sign of overt direction from the White House and Agnew says he rarely talks to the President or to his speechwriters.

Unready in 1968

Four years ago, says Agnew, he was "unready for handling the national issues, particularly the foreign policy issues" and also unfamiliar with the mechanics of a national campaign. Now he is able to draw the necessary knowledge from his own staff, which he considers "highly professional and effective."

Agnew says he is constantly briefing himself, using six or seven briefing books that are kept by his research staff. He receives the White House news summary every day and also a shorter summary prepared by his own staff consisting of articles about the Vice President or about issues in which he is interested. Agnew says that his periodical reading includes the Washington newspapers, the New York Times, the Baltimore Sun, Newsweek,

Time, National Review and Commentary plus newspapers in the cities he visits while campaigning.

He is a fan of social critic Irving Kristol, particularly his new collection of "provocative" essays, On the Democratic Idea in America. And he is reading, "for fun," the book by Stefan Lorant on the history of the presidency and the vice-presidency titled "The Glorious Burden."

Agnew's political ideas, like the ideas of many second-generation Americans, reflect contradictions between traditional pluralism and the notion that the United States is a vast melting pot of polyglot cultures. The Vice President is proud of his membership in Ahepa, the Greek-American fraternal order in which his father played a prominent role, and he believes that the conventions of ethnic groups are splendid forums for campaigning because the participants experience "a tremendous swell of patriotism (and) they're very receptive to political speeches, as much as a Fourth of July audience might be."

Finds Ethnic Insulting

But Agnew also believes that ethnic-consciousness has been unduly inflamed by the media and he thinks that the term "ethnic"—in a year in which the Committee for the Re-Election of the President has sought to corral every ethnic vote in the country—"is basically a very insulting term to apply to people."

"The idea that there are any monolithic groupings that can be suddenly assigned a place or position on issues by the intelligentsia of the country and that at that point they're supposed to react uniformly to any stimulus is abhorrent to America," the Vice President said.

Agnew also believes that racial integration has proceeded in a "counter-productive" manner through school busing and the mixing of different economic classes.

Halters into Chains

"There would be no de facto segregation if we could get rid of the biases and have the mix take place on identical socio-economic levels," Agnew said. "The artificial moves that people claim are necessary to break the halters often form new chains against integration because they put people together who are basically incompatible, but worse than being racially incompatible, are incompatible in tens of other ways. And that I find is inhibiting the natural melding of the country that should be taking place."

"In some ways I think that the focus on the extreme and forced methods of racial mixing are counter-productive to the effort. This doesn't mean that I don't feel that where has been a governmental restraint that prevents the (integration) result taking place, that restraint shouldn't be removed. That's why I'm for open housing. That's the

kind of restraint that nobody can break through.

"But once you have an open housing law, the contrived forcing of people into contacts and neighborhoods where they don't have the same economic ability, where they don't have the same identity of interest, where they just don't fit or they don't mix causes exacerbations that raise simplistic bars to the actual result coming about. We have a lot of the best and most successful mixing of the races taking place in areas where nobody notices it."

Labels Rejected

Agnew considers his views on integration "liberal" but he will not apply any categorization to his philosophy as a whole.

"I'm not a conservative," he says. I'm not a liberal." Agnew also rejects the designation of "moderate" on the grounds that "that's what both the liberals and the conservatives consider themselves."

But the Vice President readily spelled out in his views in response to a question about what his own vision is for America.

"First of all, I really hope that we will get to the point where we'll be able to look to individuals instead of their race or their sex or their creed or any of those artificial considerations of judgment. Second, I hope that our educational system will begin to be more heterogeneous in the sense that we

would not have this tremendous focus on opinion arts... (We need) more science-oriented efforts and a greater appreciation for the development of careers and particularly the dignifying of blue collar or semi-professional occupations, which are desperately needed to make the country function now and which attract few young people because there's not a great amount of accolade connected with them. I think that would be the greatest stabilizing thing that could happen to the country.

Need for More Pride

"And then a resurgence of American confidence in America's foreign policy and in our principles of how we deal with other countries. I think that's been eroding but is beginning to come back.

The masochism that has prevailed among so many of our people about what we've done in respect to other nations is not justified by the record. Here's a country that in 1948 could have destroyed the world or dictated terms to the world after the atomic bomb. What did we do? We rehabilitated our enemies, we attempted to bring about an era of good will in the world and we defended those who were subject to aggression. And for that we've been maligned, I think very unjustly.

"Then I think we've got to take more pride as a country in our accomplishments... The inventiveness of the American people under our free system has shown itself to be one of the most stimulative environments for pure intellectual progress in the world. Instead of that, we're constantly looking to some of the socialistic countries who've made great strides, too, but in a very controlled and rigorous fashion."

Defers 1976 Discussion

Agnew's world outlook would become of immediate importance if he inherited or succeeded to the presidency, a question that is raised by someone almost everytime he shakes hands in a crowd. The Vice President says he notices such comments and is pleased by them but believes that any discussion of a 1976 candidacy would "erode the '72 campaign."

"One thing I've done in politics is try to deal with the immediate and perceivable future and not regress into undue preoccupation with what happened in the past or try to predict what's going to happen in the future," Agnew said.

Despite his preoccupation with the present, Agnew and his staff make no secret that they consider the Vice President's present low-key style far better suited to a presidential candidacy than his celebrated rhetoric of the recent past. When an old lady in Peoria shook his hand this week and said, "Nixon now, Agnew four years from now," Agnew gave her a big smile and replied:

"Let's win this one first."