

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 1972 PAGE A18

The Remaking of a Vice President

In Miami Beach, by way of commenting on the Eagleton affair, the Republicans made a lot of jokes about the fact that *they* did not intend to change vice presidents in mid-campaign. What they intended instead, it seems, was to change the one they already had. Thus Mr. Agnew was recalled to the factory in late August for the replacement of faulty brakes and the addition of a steering wheel. Since the improved product is to go on display today—the Vice President opens his campaign in Minnesota—the rest of us might profitably give some thought to the question of how we are to judge the “new Agnew.” Are we to allow for the possibility of authentic change?

Simple fairness, in our view, suggests that we should. But in appraising both the motive and the outcome of this strange enterprise, it seems to us that some rigorous standards of judgment are required. Most assuredly they are not the standards recommended by Mr. Agnew himself in the Miami Beach press conference in which he announced his own change of personality. On that remarkable occasion, the Vice President sought at once to disclaim and defend his immediate past in a series of statements that were a good deal less than honest and which, in any event, tended to miss the point in a fairly large way.

Mr. Agnew seemed to agree with his questioners: it was the “rhetoric” that had got everyone upset. He then proceeded to supply two contradictory explanations of how this had come about. On the one hand, he suggested that he had well understood, but never much cared for, the role of “cutting edge,” which he strongly implied had been foisted upon him by Mr. Nixon—whose man he was. On the other hand, Mr. Agnew suggested not only that he had never understood the role itself, but that he had never consciously played it. This line of reasoning found him quite baffled that people should have taken some of his attacks on them so *personally*, as, for example, in the matter of the “radi-libs.” Here he had been, merely defining and describing a political position many people held, and they had “misconstrued” his meaning altogether. Well, he didn’t intend to use that formulation again. “I think,” Mr. Agnew said, “it was a mistake . . . I think everyone in politics has to learn those matters of what may be called sensitivity.” In an allusion to Senator McGovern’s foolish comparison of some administration actions to Hitlerian behavior, the

Vice President observed that at least his remarks about the radicals and the liberals were not “in the same class as attempting to identify an incumbent president with the Hitler philosophy of a bygone day, as far as rhetoric is concerned.”

Weren’t they? Hear Mr. Agnew in Greenville, South Carolina, on October 26, 1970, at the height of his radical/liberal mania:

When radical liberals in influential places in and out of government serve as apologists for anarchy and civil strife, they are aping other apologists — those who indulged the Nazi excesses in the late Twenties and early Thirties. This kind of person gives respectability to undermining of the system. . . . We cannot have enough of public demonstrations . . . So wrote a leader of Nazi Germany. . . .

And so on. We have spared you the full quotation from Joseph Goebbels, which Mr. Agnew found

so apt to the occasion. And we will spare you a full recounting of Mr. Agnew’s other elaborations on the term radic-lib (“pampered egotists who sneer at honesty,” for example) which people somehow “misconstrued” as personal attacks. The point is that Mr. Agnew’s selective and inaccurate recollection of the facts does not bode particularly well for the authenticity of his professed desire to change.

But there is a far more important point to be

made, the one that eluded Mr. Agnew entirely. Quite simply it is that "rhetoric" never was and isn't now at the heart of the issue. Indeed, so long as the Vice President continues to suggest that a little tinkering with words, style, mannerism and image is what is wanted, he will only be reinforcing the impression that what we are about to witness is nothing more than a cynical piece of stagecraft, contrived to serve the short-term election interests of the President and the long-term ambitions of Mr. Agnew himself. For it was the abysmal judgment and the mean-mindedness that underlay his words, which raised so many questions about Spiro Agnew's fitness for high office—not the vocabulary in which he chose to express them. And, similarly, we would remind the Vice President and those about to observe his fall campaign that it is not as a flexible or skilled political performer that he is asking to be judged, but rather as a potential President of the United States.

If we were to choose just one example of Mr. Agnew's more disqualifying behavior from an earlier time, it would be his public attack a couple of years ago on the academic condition of Dunbar High School here. Never mind that it caused great pain and demoralization among those Dunbar youngsters who were working mightily to achieve good records and make their school a better place, never mind what it did to their pride and self-respect to have the Vice President of the United States speak sarcastically of their abilities in the course of an address he was delivering elsewhere in the country: Mr. Agnew wished to score a point (a faulty one, as it happened) concerning the decline of schools since the desegregation order of 1954, and if that meant hurting the self-esteem of a lot of obscure high school students, well, so be it. That is what we mean by abysmal judgment and mean-mindedness, and it also goes to the point of the extraordinary vanity Mr. Agnew has developed, or at least displayed, in office.

Evidently Mr. Nixon toyed for a while with the idea of replacing Mr. Agnew on his ticket, and evidently too there was pressure from many Republicans (of the non-radical-lib type) to get him to do so. Simultaneously with his announcement of the decision to keep Mr. Agnew aboard, the President let it be known that a new "toned-down" vice president was what he had decided on and this was conveyed to Mr. Agnew in fairly explicit terms. Thus, the reconstructed Mr. Agnew. Whether the President had called the first turn as well as the second, whether something more than political expediency was involved, and which is the "real" Agnew—all this remains in doubt. Along with many other spectators at the show we remain to be persuaded that something more than a new paint job is in the offing.