

THE PRESS

The Weekly Agnew Special

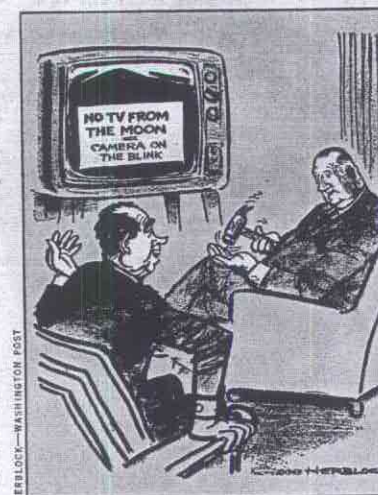
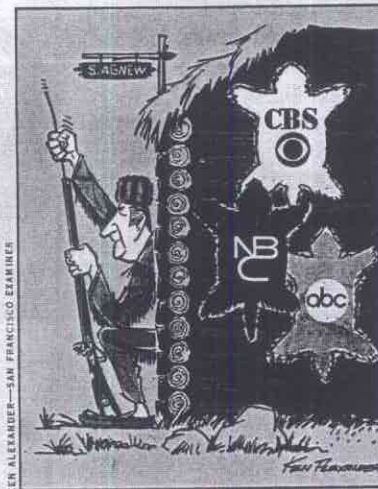
The *Spiro Agnew Show*, which seemed at first to be a one-shot special, may have gone weekly. Exactly seven days after the Vice President telecast his Des Moines attack on TV newscasters and commentators, he went on the air again, this time to flay the *New York Times* and the Washington Post Co. Unlike the premiere, the second installment, from George Wallace's own Montgomery, Ala., did not get network coverage. But it was telecast, live or on tape, in some cities, including New York and Washington (where it was carried by the Post's WTOP-TV). It continued to give the Vice President so much attention on network news and in the nation's press that some may have wondered whatever became of the President.

Again Richard Nixon was not far off-stage. Like the first speech, the Montgomery message was written by Nixon Speechwriter Pat Buchanan and circulated around the White House before delivery. There were other similarities. As in Des Moines, some worthy targets loomed in Agnew's sights; as in Des Moines, his ammunition was faulty.

Same Words. The American people, he said, "should be made aware of the trend toward the monopolization of the great public-information vehicles and the concentration of more and more power over public opinion in fewer and fewer hands." It was a promising introduction to a subject that needs discussion. But the only news conglomerate he mentioned was the Washington Post Co., which is hardly a giant in a field inhabited by the Newhouse chain (22 newspapers, seven TV stations, seven radio stations, 20 magazines), Scripps-Howard (16 newspapers, four TV stations, three radio stations) and the Knight group (eleven newspapers, six radio stations, one TV station).

Not only are the Washington Post Co.'s holdings relatively small (one newspaper, one news magazine, three TV stations, two radio stations), they are in highly competitive situations. The newspaper, as Owner Kay Graham was quick to point out, publishes in one of the three U.S. cities left with three major dailies under separate ownership. (New York and Chicago are the others.) And the magazine, *Newsweek*, hardly lacks for vigorous competition.

Agnew complained further that the Washington Post Co.'s outlets are "all grinding out the same editorial line," and "hearken to the same master." There, the Vice President had a point. Mrs. Graham is not inclined to install top editors who stray too far from her own liberal views. It was perhaps unfortunate for her that when *Newsweek's* Lester Bernstein commented on Agnew's speech over CBS radio in New York, he chose precisely the same words used by Mrs. Graham. But a partial con-



"SPIRO, I REALLY DIDN'T MEAN FOR YOU TO GO THIS FAR."

tradition of Agnew's charge of monopolism was produced by an issue close to Richard Nixon's heart. Last week the *Post* ran an editorial supporting Judge Haynsworth's elevation to the Supreme Court; WTOP opposed it.

Agnew again zeroed in on a worthwhile subject when he turned to the diminishing newspaper competition in many American cities. With so many newspapers dying, he said, many of the survivors have "grown fat and irresponsible." True enough, although the *New York Times* is not a convincing example. It may be true that the *Times* would be still better if it had more competition; but most professionals would disagree with Agnew's claim that the *Times* has got worse since the death of other New York papers.

The Vice President blundered when he cited examples to indicate bad news judgment by the *Times*. He declared that it "did not carry a word" about 300 Congressmen and 59 Senators who signed a letter endorsing the President's policy in Viet Nam. The fact is that the story missed the first edition but made all others.

Jefferson, Jackson. At one point Agnew declared: "The day when [newsmen] enjoyed a form of diplomatic immunity from comment and criticism of what they said is over." But as James Reston asked in his *New York Times* column the next morning, when did that day ever dawn? Among some famous old snipes at the press noted by Reston: Thomas Jefferson writing in 1803 that "even the least informed of the people have learnt that nothing in a newspaper is to be believed"; and Andrew Jackson strafing in 1837 some editors "who appear to fatten on slandering their neighbors and hire writers to lie for them." Most U.S. Presidents have fought back against attacks from the press—although in recent times the villains were often Republican publishers rather than liberal editors.

Agnew's views continued to draw considerable sympathy. The *San Francisco Examiner* editorialized: "It's high time somebody else started getting headlines besides the yippies, bomb-throwers and the disruptive critics of every traditional American value." Vermont Royster, editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, bemoaned the fact that Agnew had drawn no praise for being in the company of critics like Jefferson, and added: "All of which leads to the melancholy conclusion that the press can dish it out but quivers when it's dished back."

There was a good deal of quivering. Norman Isaacs, executive editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and *Times*, fumed: "What we're facing now is a drive for a real one-party press, not through free expression but through open intimidation by the top officials of our Government." The *Chicago Sun-Times* said Agnew's attitude recalled a 1920 quote by Lenin: "Why should a government that is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be crit-

icized? It would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal than guns." To suggest even remotely that the Nixon Administration takes a Leninist attitude toward the press is patently absurd.

The *Washington Post* ran a calm editorial the day after the Montgomery speech, characterizing it as "temperate and thoughtful . . . and in no way menacing on its face." There is indeed plenty to criticize about contemporary U.S. journalism—all the more so because the press and TV make little effort at self-criticism or self-examination. In fact, some of the vulnerable areas were not touched upon by the Vice President.

Bold, not Bland. In television it can be argued that far from being too opinionated, news is not opinionated and hard-hitting enough. Among the more thought-provoking responses to Agnew was a speech by Fred Friendly to the California Institute of Technology. Urging "bolder, not blander illumination" of issues on television, Friendly recalled regretfully that when he was president of CBS News in 1964, he decided against analysis of President Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin speech. Edward R. Murrow, for one, immediately phoned Friendly to deplore the omission. "I shall always believe," Friendly said last week, "that if journalism had done its job properly that night and in the days following, America might have been spared some of the agony that followed the Tonkin Gulf resolution."

In print journalism, on the other hand, a legitimate subject of concern is the growing phenomenon of reporters who are becoming participants in rather than observers of events (*TIME*, Oct. 24). On Moratorium Day in October, thousands of newsmen signed petitions for peace, joined in rallies and donned buttons or armbands. During this month's Moratorium activities, reporter participation was less pronounced but still present. (Not all the involved newsmen, it should be noted, were against the war. The *Chattanooga Times*, in fact, carried both pro- and antiwar ads bought by groups of their own reporters.)

Managements face the difficult question of where a reporter's civic right to be involved in politics ends and his journalistic duty to be fair and detached begins. Many young journalists have been raised in an atmosphere of advocacy, and are not willing to accept the traditional rules about journalistic detachment. When Agnew prescribes a "high wall" between comment and news, he makes a hoary, oversimplified demand for what is impossible—"objectivity." But questions of journalistic fairness and variety or uniformity of opinion are valid issues for debate. The U.S. press, far from feeling intimidated, ought to welcome Agnew's challenge—and reply as vigorously as it sees fit. The result could make *The Spiro Agnew Show* and its successors (*The Dean Burch Hour? The Ronald Reagan Review?*) into a regular and fascinating TV series.