

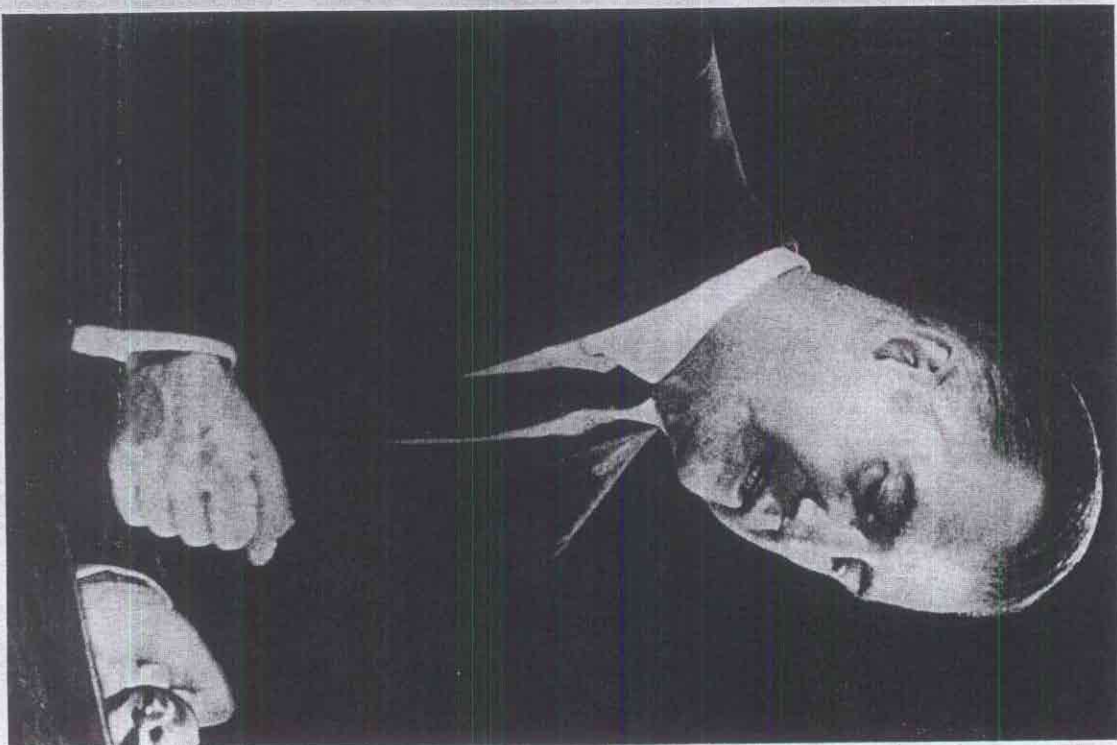
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GUEST PRIVILEGE

The most controversial figure
in American politics accepts LIFE's
invitation to explain himself

Spiro Agnew Says:

**I did it on
my own**



The most often asked question of the past weeks has been, "What set the Vice President off?" The most frequently suggested answer is, "The President."

That is the easy answer. It certainly would be an obvious explanation in keeping with the traditional job description. But it is not the answer, and this in itself is characteristic of an Administration which does not value answers because they are easy or obvious.

The reason I spoke out was because, like the great silent majority, I had had enough. I had endured the didactic inadequacies of the garrulous in silence, hoping for the best but witnessing the worst for many months. And because I am an elected official, I felt I owed it to those I serve to speak the truth.

One of the great dangers of the media is the constant temptation of elected officials to use them to their political advantage. It does not take great perception to know that if an elected official advocates certain policies and eschews others, he will not only get news space but editorial plaudits as well. If all an elected official wants is a good press, he has only to recite certain accepted precepts . . . and most of the media will respond with a conditioned

accolade to the ringing phrase. Couching it in negative terms, if an elected official wants to avoid a bad press, all he has to do is fuzzle the controversial issues or carefully work his way around them.

But what kind of leader is this? More importantly, what kind of human being is this? Someone who values expediency at best and would not be above deceit at worst. I am not speaking now of men who sincerely go down the line with the media majority on all issues, but rather of those who use their ready knowledge of what news and editorial writers like—and many do—to advance their own political careers.

Thus, it was not that I suddenly launched a spiritual crusade nor that I was handed the White House standard, but that I was speaking my thoughts and that those thoughts abraded some revered dogmas of the Fourth Estate.

I did not make my speech at New Orleans to accommodate the President or even the American people. I made it to fulfill my own conviction that a political leader should lead,

should point out problems where problems exist and dangers where dangers exist.

I made the speech because I believe—and believe deeply—that, while the right of lawful dissent is sacred, the purposes behind any civil dissent are subject to question. Moreover, perpetual street and campus demonstrating can erode the fabric of American democracy.

This is not a new idea with me but one I have articulated throughout my political career. My first experience with public protest came when I was the county executive of Baltimore County, Md. There I saw lawful demonstration deteriorate to unlawful civil disobedience.

As governor of Maryland, I saw civil disobedience flame into full-scale insurrection.

Dissent is one of the most popular, yet one of the most widely misunderstood, subjects of the day. Too often the very subtle lines which separate violence, nonviolent civil disobedience, dramatic demonstration and conventional dissent are blurred. There are important distinctions to be registered which cleanly separate these categories.

While most thoughtful individuals condemn violence, many find it easy to justify nonviolent civil disobedience where the cause is to redress a just grievance. Even here, there are important distinctions to be drawn. The nonviolent breaking of a discriminatory law enforcing segregation in a restaurant, later declared unconstitutional, has a retrospective justification. But the nonviolent breaking of a law unrelated to discrimination for which redress is sought, such as lying in the street to block traffic as a protest against the denial of equal employment opportunity, cannot be condoned. The rights of others not involved in the dispute to their freedom of locomotion are thereby disrupted.

The most earnest advocate of nonviolent civil disobedience would have little sympathy for an activity which affected his right to gainful endeavor. I doubt whether the network commentator who feels empathy for nonviolent demonstration would respond favorably should several militants anchor themselves in front of his cameras and refuse to be moved so that the show could go on.

Coming next to the distinction between lawful demonstration and what used to be conventional dissent, the following points are in order. Peaceful picketing and other dramatic group activities which interfere with no law nor any individual's rights are clearly protected by the Constitution. But this does not necessarily mean that such emotion-provoking tactics are justified to marshal opinion for every dispute. Before the media granted valuable advertisement to the antic arts, people were more inclined to debate their points of disagreement than make spectacles of themselves. Persuasive dialogues, suitably publicized, not only preserve the right of dissent, but offer constructive alternatives so that the parties are allowed to move toward eventual accommodation of each other. Solution of this type is impossible in demonstrations because the communication sought is not with the party triggering the complaint, but with the noninvolved whom the demonstrators hope to enlist in their support.

Now I understand very well that many thoughtful people believe that the knottier social problems of our time could never have been solved without dramatic demonstration to trigger the public conscience. I cannot agree with this concept because the entire history of social and economic change in this country is evidence of a steady improvement since the turn of the century. It is true that the rate of progress has increased in recent years; but, even conceding that demonstration has been somewhat of a factor, frightening forces have been set in motion as the public has become conditioned to precipitate action rather than quiet discussion. The announced decision of the more extreme antiwar groups to continue and to escalate their disruptive activities proves this.

Is it not time to turn the energy and purpose of the American people toward the construction of solutions to the difficult problems rather than protest against their existence?

Consider the idea of protest purely, removing it from any issue, and still it raises a multitude of questions.

Protest is generally negative in content. It is against some person or thing. It does not offer

constructive alternatives and it is not conducive to creating the thoughtful atmosphere where positive answers may be formulated.

Over the last few years we have seen protest become a way of life. In fact, protest has become a policy and program unto itself. This is negativism at its quintessence.

Still, the greatest problem with protest is its open invitation to exploitation. We are fortunate when it is only being used by fledgling politicians to further their careers. We are foolish not to recognize that it can be used by far more malevolent men to foster far more nefarious goals. I need only rest my case upon the short and turbulent life of the Weimar Republic to prove this point.

Moving to the particular type of protest I attacked, the Vietnam Moratorium, it is not only negative in content but brutally counter-productive. It encourages the North Vietnamese government to escalate the fighting and fortifies their recalcitrance at the bargaining table in Paris. It undermines the policies of the President of the United States—the only man who has both the power and the responsibility to make peace.

All of these factors prompted me to speak, and I might add that the response from across the country has been both extensive and gratifying. However, had the only reaction been critical, I would still not regret my words. I spoke because I believe that a leader must lead, and I believe that an elected official must speak honestly to his constituents. Prior to every election, I have divulged my personal holdings for public scrutiny. It would be unthinkable to conceal my convictions.

Finally, I believe that the people of the United States would like to know their Vice President for what he really is and what he really thinks. The game of "ridicule the Vice Presidency," played so enthusiastically over the years, is wearing thin on the people of our country. They know that Vice Presidents are people, not cartoon characters.

For another view on dissent, see page 52