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Spiro Agnew: Heresy in High Places

By Meg Greenfield

"Does that kind of thing actually bother Nixon?"

"Oh, yes. Absolutely. He's down on NBC. Way down. Of course, RN doesn't know everything that happened. If he did, if he knew how bad they'd really been, he'd be even more upset than he is."

Shakespeare shifted a bit in his seat and began to smile. "Now. Now listen to this. Here's what I thought I'd do. I thought I'd go to Walter Scott, the NBC board chairman—this would be in private of course, just the two of us in his office—and say, 'Here are the instances. Here are the instances where we feel you've been guilty of bias in your coverage of Nixon. We are going to monitor every minute of your broadcast news, and if this kind of bias continues, and if we are elected, then you just might find yourself in Washington next year answering a few questions. And you just might find yourself having a little trouble getting some of your licenses renewed.'"

Shakespeare paused and smiled. "I'm not going to do it because I'm afraid of the reaction. The press would band together and clobber us. But goddammit, I'd love to."

THE QUOTATION comes from Joe McGinniss's book, "The Selling of the President 1968," and in the aftermath of Vice President Agnew's full-dress speech on the networks and his subsequent, lesser swipe at some papers—including this one—the quotation is worth pondering. It comes from a book which recounts, in embarrassing detail, the image-making exertions of Mr. Nixon and his entourage during the campaign and which thus reminds us that the men of this administration have not always been votaries at the altar of unadulterated television truth. It provides a bit of historical background to the grudge that Mr. Agnew has brought into public view. It suggests that the observers who saw in the Vice President's remarks an effort at intimidation of the networks unless they straighten up and fly right politically, may have a point. And, finally, because some of the outrages that led Mr. Shakespeare and others into temptation were genuine, it brings us head to head with the disagreeable fact that network news coverage off is biased and that the networks as an institution could doubtless profit from some soul-searching and internal reform. The truth about Vice President Agnew's speech, in other words, does not lie in between: it seems to lie all over the place.

It is this situation, I think, which accounts for the wildly differing appraisals of Mr. Agnew's original speech that have been



VICE PRESIDENT AGNEW



HERBERT MARCUSE

... a bizarre kinship in perception of "Them" and "They."

made from within the rank of those who were the object of the attack. Some have publicly professed to having been put in mind of Senator Joseph McCarthy's opening-shot address in Wheeling, W.Va. Others have countered that, *mutatis mutandis*, the core of the work (under some other byline) might have been regarded as a constructive adornment to the Columbia Journalism Review. But it seems to me that Vice President Agnew did not go quite far enough to meet the first of these comparisons, and that he went much too far to make the other valid. Both arguments, in any case, fail to give much weight to what struck me as formative and decisive in the speech—its imagery, assumptions and tone.

The Vice President, in Montgomery, was to have made sport with the notion that there was something "socialist" in his attack on the free-enterprising networks. Actually, there are far more unthinkable thoughts to think. For I believe that you cannot begin to get at the meaning and importance of what Mr. Agnew said in his seminal work on the media until you have faced up to the mind-blowing truth; it was a hippy speech—a sort of rhetorical next-of-kin to the average SDS manifesto, eerily (and thoroughly) Marcusean in both conception and implication.

NOW, what do I mean by that?—as President Nixon might put it—First, let me tell you what I don't mean. There is something more at work here than some political generality in which Mr. Agnew, as a politician, participates. Everyone knows, for instance, that left and right in politics share many perceptions and none with more conviction than that the press is trying to do them in. So if Vice President Agnew sounded as much like Norman Mailer (in "The Armies of the Night"), expatiating on the crimes of the media, as he sounded like the put-upon and terribly hostile delegates to the Goldwater convention in 1964, it is only because they sounded so much like each other. And, in a general way, the Vice President's grievance is not a lot different from (or more persuasive than) the grievance now being so widely sired in the literature of Eugene McCarthy's campaign.

Those of us who are old enough to remember 1968 will recall that the McCarthy campaign had a prologue not unlike the epilogue to "St. Joan": all sorts of important people who (you would have thought) were for the senator and against the war, found their reasons neither to support him nor to support even the idea of his campaign; the ADA had an agony over endorsing him; the senator and his aides contributed mightily to the low-key mockery of the whole enterprise. And yet all these—the early temporizers and the inside jokesters—are now insisting that it was the press, woefully wanting in good faith and/or insight, which refused to take the senator's campaign seriously at the outset. So Vice President Agnew, in responding extravagantly to real and imagined crimes of the media, did not do anything that by itself would be politically dis-

tinctive or defining, nothing that would cause you to confuse him with Abbie Hoffman.

What gave that first speech its bizarre distinction was (1) his Herbert Marcuse-like perception of the Other—of "them," (2) his horrific (and also Marcusean) reading of what "they" are about and what "they" have already achieved, (3) his confusion of influence, on the one hand, and authority, on the other, with power, and (4) his new mobe-ish, *avanti popoli*-type solution. These are worth taking up briefly in turn.

I. "They," "Them"

WE MAY not know who they are, but they are "there" and they are malign—a sampling from Mr. Agnew's prose canon, which includes passionately felt and passionately hurled imprecations against "them," gives the reader the general idea. It is the language of street barricades:

"... glib activist element who would tell us our values are lies . . . most of them disdain to mingle with the masses who work for a living . . . they pervert honest concern to something sick and rancid . . . they are ideological eunuchs . . . they have a masochistic compulsion to destroy their country's strength . . ."

Whoever they are (they can't all be Averell Harriman), these "theys" and "thems" and "elements" have, to a striking degree, the attributes of the enemy as perceived by hippydom, being not just malevolent and devoted to the perversion of the people's

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natural interests, but also apparently important and powerful enough to deserve any amount of verbal abuse we can heap upon them. And, as it is with the Vice President's curious political bedfellows too, these enemies of the people—these anonymous "theys"—tend to appear to him only in one of two collective forms, either as dangerous classes of men at large, or as faceless oligarchs—"power elites," in the phrase of the late C. Wright Mills (a founding father of the "movement"), the "establishment" or the "system," as the young would have it. Thus:

"... a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts . . . a small group of men . . . a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one and enjoying a monopoly sanctioned and licensed by government . . . a handful of commentators . . . this little group of men . . ."

The idiom could embellish any New Left document, but it comes, of course, from the Vice President's speech. It has been said that more people than usual had a hand in the composition of that speech—including at least one presidential speech-writer and perhaps even the President himself. If that is the case it demonstrates only that the Vice President's unexpected leanings find sympathy higher and wider in government

than might have been supposed.

II. What "They" Have Done

THIS IS where Marcuse comes in. It is his theory that the people have been poisoned, that we have been made by the media and our assorted other overlords to think we need things and know things and even think things that we neither need nor know nor even think. This the media have helped achieve by "systematic manipulation and control," by what Marcuse describes as "administered language." Just so Vice President Agnew, who suggests to us not merely that we follow the lead of Cleopatra and avenge ourselves on the bearer of the bad news, but rather—and more important—that by now we have a headful of ideas and beliefs and impressions that we cannot trust or credit because they have been foisted upon us by design. "To guarantee in advance," he tells us, that the President's call for unity would be challenged, one network lined up Averell Harriman who "recited perfectly." Mr. Agnew's speech is based on Mr. Marcuse's more fearsome assumptions, plagued with anxiety about the effect of "network news on the national mind," plaintive in its admission of helplessness: "Whether what I have said to you tonight will be heard and seen at all by the nation is not *my* decision; it is not *your* decision; it is *their* decision." Them.

III. Power

"WHAT DO Americans know of the men who wield this power?" the Vice President demanded to know, and the answer of course

was, practically nothing. Even the ones we can see on the screen, he declared, operate from a "privileged sanctuary." Next to "them" and "they," "power" is probably the word most often used in the vice presidential text—loosely, to be sure, but with no less sinister connotation for that. ("... four powerful voices harken to the same master," as he characterized the relationship between the separate parts of the Washington Post Company.) In the best contemporary radical manner, Mr. Agnew appears to identify "power" as anything that goes into making a decision, and suggests that "power" is illegitimate when it is (1) exercised by a few men, (2) exercised by men we cannot see and do not know, (3) exercised without recourse to a national referendum. His speech abounds with quotations to this effect, and it is pure student left dogma.

When you reread Mr. Agnew's assault on this small group of hidden, powerful men who are making obnoxious decisions every day for which we cannot hold them accountable even though those decisions affect our lives intimately, you will wonder why the same assault could not be made on the captains of the automobile industry or the Harvard Board of Overseers or the "military-industrial complex." And then you will realize, of course, that it already has been—only not (as yet) by Mr. Agnew.

Here he participates lustily in the oblit-

eration of distinctions between influence, power, and (franchised or regulated or elective or practically circumscribed) authority. The latter (which is in fact the "system") can be abused by those who have it; but the point about authority, corporately or otherwise granted, is that it can be withdrawn and that the structure upon which it rests can also be altered or reformed. When the structure is clobbered to the ground altogether, that's when you get "power" in some of its uglier forms: student, mob, governmental. It is curious that Vice President Agnew didn't seem to recognize this fact and also that the institution he chose to storm first is, in a way, the most inappropriate object of his concern. As these institutions go, the networks are probably the most circumscribed, the most accountable, the most responsive (some would say chicken) of the lot. They are held to account—in one way and another—by the government, by competition, by news events, by their myriad labor unions, by the public, by their parent companies, by their shareholders, by their advertisers. You do not have to think the result comes out very well to recognize that the faults of network news proceed from something other than the naked exercise of power by a few politically prejudiced top dogs.

IV. Power to the People

IT'S NOT entirely clear what Mr. Agnew had in mind by way of a solution to the network problem. At moments he seemed on the verge of announcing his intention to seize the administration building. Then again he would come back to the more familiar "demand"—a la Berkeley and Harvard and elsewhere—that the people participate in the decision-making, that they reclaim the power that is theirs. "The people must defend themselves," the Vice President warned. The networks must be made "more responsible to the views of the nation and more responsible to the people they serve." And again: "The people are entitled to a full accounting . . ." He concluded with a call to the people—numbers of whom then flooded the networks with abuse—to "let the networks know [by phone and by mail] that they want their news straight and objective." He did everything short of asking amnesty in advance.

THERE ARE, of course, all kinds of theories as to why the Vice President gave that first speech at this time, and you can make a pretty good case for any of them in terms of immediate political purpose. But I think that the Vice President's speech, taken together with other administration attacks—on the students, on its critics, and so on—raises larger and more interesting questions than those concerning the weekend of the march on Washington. What prompts people who are in authority and who have a stake in its preservation inside and outside government to lunge and flail in this manner? Why all the blaming and accusing and deploring? One possibility is that men so long accustomed to being out of office and to hurling all these charges at nameless bureaucrats and others in office—blaming the world's ills on them—are missing an opponent and an explana-

tion. Now they are in government and it's still someone else's fault; only this time it's the fault of hidden, nameless faces who are not in government. They are, that is, like the kids, still protesting. I lean to this theory because it is full of promise and hope. It allows for the possibility that the novelty will vanish, the assaults will diminish, and the government will get down to governing.