

Mr. Agnew Among His Newspaper Clippings

Ordinarily it is necessary to retain a high-priced publicity firm to do for you what Vice President Agnew has been doing for The Washington Post over the months—free of charge and sometimes on TV to boot—so we don't want to seem ungrateful. These saturation campaigns, as any publicist will tell you, can cost a pretty penny, and we were, therefore, all the more impressed, upon reading Mr. Agnew's Texas speech, to see how many new accounts he has acquired—Life magazine and its correspondent, Hugh Sidey; Carl Rowan; Harriet Van Horne; the Atlanta Constitution; the Arkansas Gazette. There were other reasons to be impressed: it's not every day of the week, after all, that a national figure rises to rescue from obscurity the growing list of complaints that have been lodged against the administration he serves, proudly trotting out the charges in a seemingly endless vista for the benefit of a party fund-raising dinner. Finally, there is Mr. Agnew's enterprise as a researcher. Surely by now he must preside over the most impressive file of newspaper clippings the world has seen since the Collyer brothers' estate was disposed of.

In view of all this it hardly seems fitting to find trivial fault; therefore we will pass quickly over the fact that it was the Vice President—not we—who construed an editorial assertion that Mr. Nixon was withholding from the public a part of his policy that might make the sudden Cambodian venture seem more rational as meaning (his words) that "the President had lost his sanity." And like everyone else who printed, in their entirety, Mr. Nixon's remarks about the "bums", we were of course pleased, though scarcely chastened, to be told some time after the event (when hell was breaking loose) that the President had actually had some special episode in mind concerning an individual case which he did not see fit to mention at the time. But the snitch-snatch quoting game hardly constitutes our main complaint, and, alas, there is a serious aspect to all this fun. For it is not the selective passages Mr. Agnew chooses to read from his clippings that disturbs us, or even the ingenious interpretation he gives them. Rather it is the special perspective he brings to his files, with which we have quarrelled before in editorials that somehow slipped through the Houston fund-raising net.

The problem is the I-me perspective in which Mr. Agnew insists on viewing himself as an issue of some importance. The Atlanta Constitution, he will say, "which doesn't care much for me anyway;" the Arkansas Gazette—"which views me with varying degrees of horror," and so on. Never mind that all this is bending the "Washington-New York axis" out of shape. What Mr. Agnew does not seem to understand in his continuing self-absorption and in the related chatter about whether he will "lower his voice" or go—as now promised—for C above High C, is that the issues are Vietnam-Cambodia, the sliding economy, civil unrest, racial tensions. And, accordingly, the speeches he gives are im-

portant as an issue only in that they reflect Mr. Nixon's policies and his views on these matters. There are, to be sure, many persons in the administration who do not share the apparent presidential-vice presidential view that the economy can be saved or the casualty rate in Indochina lowered or civil peace restored if only Harriet Van Horne will shape up, that the critics are at the heart of the administration's troubles, that to characterize their criticism as a threat to the nation akin to that of foreign enemies is sound policy and wise thought. And it is with these persons, as we have said before, that Mr. Agnew's quarrel exists: it is they to whom he is doing his damage and they with whom he must make his peace. Mr. Agnew is a threat to the administration and to its chances of governing wisely and well—he is not a threat to the press.

This brings us to a rather frivolous question which the Vice President has injected into the argument he is pleased to believe concerns himself and his entitlements—namely his First Amendment right of free speech. And this comes up with such regularity, that we think it might be well to dwell for a moment on both his rights and his powers as Vice President. To our knowledge there is no federal or state statute that prevents the Vice President from saying anything he pleases. But he must expect that its relationship to what the administration is doing will be commented upon and judged. For even though he has an incontrovertible right to go around the country calling people and groups of people names, he should be aware that he has no related right to expect that he will be admired in consequence.

That raises the second point: Mr. Agnew's powers and his perks. There is no "right to respect" for government officials written into the Constitution of a country that got its start by spitting in King George's eye and which has done its best ever since to keep its public officials aware that they are serving on public sufferance and often with a minimum of public tolerance. The glory and glamor and trappings of the office itself, in short do not automatically compel either awe or respect—do not presuppose it—and Mr. Agnew's failure to assimilate this idea is somehow akin to the spirit that temporarily foisted upon us the Ruritanian White House uniform—it's all really of a piece.

But if respect does not automatically come with the job or with its outward symbols, the Vice President should nonetheless be heartened to know that he *does* have certain powers which are wholly unshared with a critical press. For the press and the critics generally may howl their heads off at the administration in office—its policies and its conceits—but the press has no power whatever to degrade or demean the highest offices in the land. Mr. Agnew can rest his fears on that account. The power to demean the presidency or the vice presidency in this nation reposes solely with the men who hold the office.