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F.Y.I.

"I believe that what I have had to say will stand the scrutiny of rational examination, whether or not one agrees with the point of view presented."—Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, in a speech at Miami Beach, Nov. 3, 1971.

Not being among those who regularly agree with the point of view of the Vice President, we probably subject what he has to say with more scrutiny than most people, especially when he is talking about us. You could call it masochism, but it has its rewards—when you discover the level of accuracy and the degree of integrity which Mr. Agnew brings to his self-appointed role as Inspector General of the media you can't help feeling just a little bit better about your own work. For example, there is the Vice President's recent tantrum about two quotations—one from a book review in this newspaper and one from a review of the same book ("Our Gang," by Philip Roth)—in Newsweek—both of which alleged that the Nixon administration had planned to eliminate free lunches for 1.5 million poor children. Mr. Agnew called this a "distortion" and a "misrepresentation" and a "propaganda canard" (which is an elitist way of calling something a lie) and by way of trying to prove his point he went on to assert "the facts of the case"—that the number of needy children receiving free lunch under federal programs will have increased from 2.8 million, when Mr. Nixon took office, to 8 million by the end of the current fiscal year. Now, this is fair enough and may even turn out to be accurate. But it also has absolutely nothing to do with the two quotes from The Washington Post and Newsweek which Mr. Agnew took exception to, and strictly For Your Information we would like to set the record straight.

What the Post book review said was that Mr.

Nixon had "wanted to eliminate lunches for 1.5 million presumably needful schoolchildren, a proposal his own nutrition expert called 'mean-spirited'". (Understandably, Agnew severed that last part of the sentence, for it is a fact that Mr. Jean Mayer, the former White House consultant on nutrition who was appointed by Mr. Nixon to run the 1969 White House Conference on Hunger, did characterize the Nixon administration's approach to the school lunch program in just those words.) For his part, Newsweek's book reviewer made a glancing reference to "the administration's plans to deprive a million and a half children of meals in school." Now the truth of the matter is that both of these allegations are beyond dispute; one might quibble over the precise number of children involved, but it is a fact that last month the Agriculture Department issued new regulations lowering the annual family income figure which defines "poverty" for the purpose of qualifying for free school lunches, and nobody questions that as many as 1.5 million children would have been lopped off the rolls under the new guidelines. This was not an idea under consideration, mind you; it was actually decided and publicly announced. And it was only undone after a howl of outraged protest from Congress, including a letter to the White House from 59 senators, Republicans as well as Democrats, who urged the President to "intervene in this situation immediately and to prevent what we must consider an unlawful interpretation (of the law) which was passed by the Congress and signed by you as a fulfillment of our pledges to put an end to hunger in America's schoolrooms." Bowing to this pressure, the Agriculture Department reversed itself. That in brief, is what we would consider to be a "rational examination" of the facts of this case and you may judge for yourself who was engaging in propaganda and dealing in "canards."