

The Spiro of '76

The only excitement of the Republican Convention had nothing to do with this year's presidential campaign. It was an opening skirmish for the 1976 contest. Liberals clashed with conservatives in a classic Republican encounter; and as usual, the outnumbered, outmaneuvered liberals lost. The big winner appears to be Spiro Agnew, who has clearly begun to run for 1976.

The issue is one of those complex numerical puzzles that tend to glaze the most attentive eye. But it is important because it concerns the allotment of delegates to the next convention. The conservatives were clearly in control of this convention and they want things kept that way four years hence. They were scarcely ruffled by a federal court decision last spring that ruled that the present delegate apportionment is unconstitutional. A conservative majority on the Rules Committee proceeded to modify the system a little, but the basic inequity remained.

Each state, big or small, gets 4½ bonus delegates if it goes for the G.O.P. presidential candidate in 1972; it is also awarded a number of delegates equal to 60% of its electoral vote. Since the smaller Southern and Western states are more likely to vote for the President than the larger industrial ones, the smaller states stand to gain the most.

Less Clout. As a slight concession to the big states, the conservatives agreed to give a bonus delegate for each Republican Governor or Senator elected as well as another delegate if at least one-half of the state's congressional delegation is Republican. While the big states are unreliably Republican in presidential elections, they consistently put Republicans in lesser offices.

Liberals were hardly satisfied with this arrangement and submitted a proposal of their own to enlarge the delegations from the big states. But they ran into opposition not only from small-state conservatives but also from big-state conservatives such as Ronald Reagan and James Buckley, who do not want to jeopardize control even if it means less clout for their delegations.

One of the liberal leaders, Illinois Senator Charles Percy, who is considered a presidential possibility, was able to persuade only eight members of his delegation to vote with him; 50 voted with the conservatives.

The White House was keeping hands off. Its first priority—maybe its only priority—was to re-elect the President. That meant avoiding any significant fight. On liberal urging, Presidential Aide John Ehrlichman and Campaign Manager Clark MacGregor made last-minute attempts to work out a compromise, but the conservatives were too confident to budge. Nor was their confidence misplaced. After a brief floor debate, the liberal proposal lost by a margin of more than 2-1.

By all accounts, the delegate system

that was adopted leaves the conservatives in control of party machinery and boosts Agnew's chances of succeeding Nixon. He was clearly the favorite of the conservatives. A Miami *Herald* poll indicated that 36% of the delegates would support him for President in 1976, far more than would favor his nearest competitor, Reagan. Trying to broaden his constituency, Agnew made a pitch for moderate support in his acceptance speech, which was notably lacking in rancor. He suggested in so many words that he may be the heir to Nixon: "The office of Vice President has two important functions: to serve the President and to learn from the President." No less a figure than Pat Nixon agreed that he was a worthy replacement. "I'm for him," she said on the final day of the convention. "I think he's done a marvelous job as Vice President

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AGNEW WELCOMED AT MIAMI AIRPORT
A bonus for conservatives.

and that he would do the same job as President."

In an amiable press conference, Agnew disclosed that when he had been on the attack he was merely serving as the President's surrogate and on the President's specific instructions. That point has been made by Agnew's aides for some time. The argument, while plausible enough, is somewhat impaired by the fact that on other occasions Agnew has insisted that his attacks on liberals, the press and some elements of youth represented his own deep convictions.

Agnew also told the reporters that he was not too comfortable being the "cutting edge" in the 1970 campaign; such a role is superfluous in the current campaign since McGovern has "seized the razor from the wrong end." Announced Agnew: "It is my total intention to confine the campaign strictly to the issues." That would be a welcome reversal.