



*Lou Cannon*

## The New 1972 Agnew

"THE GOVERNMENT official's right and power to administer his office is and should be subject to the responsible surveillance of an independent press," the speaker declared. "Far from being threatened, the public interest is enhanced by such responsible journalism."

The words are familiar to anyone who ever has attended a gathering of editors, but the members of the National Newspaper Association were accustomed to hearing other words from the man who spoke them. The speaker was Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, the same

man who precisely 26 months to the day earlier had described the nation's liberal news media as "those really illiberal, self-appointed guardians of our destiny who would like to run the country without ever submitting to the elective process as we in public office must do."

There are real evidences these days of "a new Agnew," or perhaps of "another Agnew." While the attention of the press had been focused on the trials and tribulations of Sen. Thomas Eagleton, the vice president has succeeded in mollifying many of the critics within his own party who had not wished him to have a second term. These critics generally accepted Agnew's ability and his dedication but they were afraid that fondness for negative rhetoric would obscure the presidential theme of positive accomplishment.

WHEN THE Republican re-election campaign was first conceived, it was widely assumed that Agnew would perform the familiar "attack role" usually reserved for vice presidents. But Mr. Nixon himself, speaking to his cabinet and his staff before the Eagleton disclosures, made it clear that he wants a positive campaign, not one that divides into high and low roads at all.

"The campaign will deal with policies, not personalities," says campaign chief Clark MacGregor, adding that Agnew's role will be a positive one that stresses such issues as economic progress and revenue sharing.

This is welcome news to Republican organizers, most of whom value Agnew as a campaigner. "He is a good soldier who will speak to 16 people in the rain in the middle of the night if you need him," one Western GOP field organizer said last week. "He also raises money."

A few Republican professionals think that a tamer, plainer Agnew won't be as exciting a speaker as the old

Agnew. This is unlikely. "Agnew can back off several degrees and speak pointedly about policies instead of personalities and he'll still be a hit," says the organizer who likes the "good soldier" side of the vice president. "He communicates emotionally, and he'll still communicate."

THIS ORGANIZER'S insight into the value of Agnew on the ticket is matched by a Washington-based Republican official who believes that Mr. Nixon would have replaced the vice president only if Agnew had volunteered to be replaced.

"Nixon is a chess player," he says, using the metaphor of the game whose popularity may yet replace Chinese cooking. "He doesn't like to sacrifice a pawn if he doesn't have to. He's worried about the 200,000 Ashbrook votes, he's worried about the 25,000 right-wing votes in Allegheny County in Pennsylvania, he's worried about the South. He wants to win with 100 per cent of the vote."

So we are left with an Agnew who apparently intends soberly and skillfully to discuss, as he did before the Newspaper Association, the necessity of both editors and government officials foregoing "harangue and eliche in favor of discussion based on reason and public interest." It is a pose, Agnew's critics will say, and we will be left with the same Agnew after the election.

This view ignores the persistent reality of Mr. Nixon's own presidency, the same reality that faces any representative of a minority party who wants to govern and to be remembered as a good President. If Agnew joins Mr. Nixon on the "high road" in the election, he is going to enhance his own reputation and his own chances for the presidency next time. If the high road works in the election campaign, Agnew may well stay there. For it is also the road to the presidency.