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Agnew: 2d Draft Choice

ALTHOUGH MANY political realities dictated President Nixon's decision to run again with Spiro T. Agnew, the most important was probably Democrat John B. Connally's all but total refusal to run for Vice President himself.

"Connally just didn't want it," a top-level confidant of Mr. Nixon told us, "so the discussion came down to one thing, the absence of serious alternatives."

With Connally unavailable and nobody else desirable, President Nixon's decision to keep his explosively controversial Vice President was ordained many weeks ago, but his announcement of that decision last Saturday definitely was not.

To the contrary, Mr. Nixon desperately wanted some element of uncertainty to enliven what looks to be the duller nominating convention in this century. So he quietly passed word to political advisers that he would say nothing until mid-August—on the very eve of the Aug. 21 Miami Beach convention.

What disrupted that presidential timetable was the sudden, uncontrollable surge of "anybody but Agnew" appeals from moderate and liberal Republicans.

These public attacks on

Agnew came from such obvious sources as liberal Sens. Jacob K. Javits of New York and William Saxbe of Ohio. But the anti-Agnewites actually embraced a far wider political spectrum, reaching into the White House staff itself: a silent minority of Republicans fearful that Agnew will exploit the vice presidency to gain control of the party and the presidential nomination in 1976.

Jumping the gun on his timetable, President Nixon effectively stopped this anti-Agnew tumult before it picked up momentum. In doing so, he sidetracked a potentially divisive struggle between the party's left and right wings, which could have left debilitating wounds.

Containing that left-right split, in fact, has been one of Mr. Nixon's enduring political occupations since last December, when right-wing Rep. John Ashbrook of Ohio confounded the White House and announced his own presidential candidacy.

Ashbrook's decision to offer himself as a rallying point for conservatives unhappy about Mr. Nixon's welfare reform plan and his nuclear arms control negotiations with Moscow triggered secret negotiations between conservatives and top

White House political aide Charles Colson.

USING THE THREAT of all-out support for Ashbrook, the conservatives made three demands: first, keep Agnew on the ticket; second, drop the family assistance section of the welfare-reform package; third, step up arms spending. Some of the President's chief advisers, notably former Attorney General John Mitchell, counseled acceptance of all three.

Although the President refused to budge on welfare reform, he quickly caved in on the other two demands. That was the real explanation of his sudden, unexpected plug for Agnew in his long television interview with CBS reporter Dan Rather Jan. 2. (It would be foolish, said the President, to "break up a winning combination.")

Despite the Jan. 2 embrace of Agnew, however, Ashbrook kept running for the Republican presidential nomination. He lit no fires in the primaries, but Nixon agents still worry over possible right-wing defections, particularly in crucial California. They want a strong Ashbrook endorsement of Mr. Nixon, the sooner the better. The premature announcement that Agnew

will remain on the ticket could appease these anti-Nixon conservatives and defuse the party's platform fights at Miami Beach.

There was, moreover, one other powerful factor working for Agnew. To capture New York, now better than a 50-50 prospect, Mr. Nixon needs the support of that state's increasingly powerful Conservative Party. The Conservative Party threat not to run Mr. Nixon as the party's presidential nominee in November unless Agnew is renominated was taken seriously at the White House.

The major political concern of the silent minority of anti-Agnew Republicans now is whether a typically bombastic Agnew this fall will cost Mr. Nixon millions of votes. Mr. Nixon may share the same worry. At last Friday's cabinet meeting, he praised his cabinet officers for "positive accomplishments" and urged an "affirmative" high-road campaign.

Sitting silently across the table from Mr. Nixon, neither speaking nor spoken to, was Agnew. Those present thought the President was making a not-so-subtle point to his Vice President. Whether he got the message, only time will tell.

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