

Part 3/12/73

Agnew's White House Worries

The fact that Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, facing increasing hostility at the White House, is entering a personal political crisis was indirectly but bluntly conveyed to him by one of President Nixon's senior staffers last week.

The White House staffer asked an Agnew aide this question: What can you honestly say the Vice President is doing in behalf of the President and the President's program?

Well, the Agnew man replied, we're improving our liaison with Congress and that ought to benefit the President's program on Capitol Hill.

Not good enough, snapped back the Nixon aide. Agnew, he pointed out, has been almost totally silent of late, failing to speak up in behalf of the President in his great battles — on impoundment of funds, on reduction of federal social services, on attempts to curb congressional power. No, he concluded, Agnew has been no help at all.

A White House staffer would not dare criticize the Vice President in such remarkably outspoken terms without assurance that the President

would not object. Moreover, the Nixon staff has seemed eager that this disapproving attitude be made known outside the White House gates — an attitude lethally corrosive to Agnew's still strong base among the Republican Party faithful.

Among those conservative state leaders who comprise the backbone of the Republican Party, Agnew remains the clear early frontrunner for 1976. John B. Connally, not yet turned Republican at this writing, is a distant second in their eyes.

But Agnew's strength at the grass roots derives almost wholly from Mr. Nixon's. Having failed to build up party alliances and friendships over the past four years, Agnew's prestige at the grass roots is now imperiled by the proliferating message of Agnew's low esteem at the White House.

So far, at last, this chill from the White House has not discouraged Agnew himself. His close advisers believe he has made a tentative decision to seek the 1976 nomination, which explains his refraining from the strident

rhetoric that he must eliminate as his trademark in order to widen his political base.

As his aide told the White House staffer, Agnew is attempting to build links with Republicans on Capitol Hill — not really for the purpose of boosting Nixon programs but to seek political alliances. Within the last month, Agnew aides newly assigned to congressional liaison have paid visits to the party's congressional leaders to make a stand-by offer of Agnew's assistance and to open regular two-way communications.

Beyond this, Agnew supporters want him to start worrying about his new playboy image as Frank Sinatra's best buddy. They have advised him to avoid recurrences of his side-by-side appearance with Sinatra over national television a month ago at the Bob Hope Golf Tournament in Palm Springs.

If Agnew can actually do all this — tone down his rhetoric, build congressional alliances and bury the Sinatra program — his political advisers feel the cool wind from the White House will not

make that much difference. They believe that a lame duck Nixon will have little impact on the 1976 nomination and cannot conceivably sell the party a newly converted Connally.

But this view does not comprehend the precariousness of Agnew's present position. He is without government duties, having been stripped of his politically valuable function of liaison with the mayors and governors. He clearly is not in close contact with the President. And now the White House staff is eager to put out the word that he is not helping Mr. Nixon nearly enough.

Agnew's danger is that the sum total of all this will carry to state Republican leaders the belief now widely held inside the White House: Agnew is not a serious or industrious figure worthy of running for President or capable of being elected. If that appraisal begins to melt away the thin veneer of Agnew's popularity among party regulars, he will have faded disastrously, long before Mr. Nixon decides whether or not to try to crown a successor.