

## The Agnew problem

President Nixon had indicated that he would make public his choice of running mate before convention time (the Republicans meet August 21-23) so that delegates would have a chance to discuss it. Now he has announced—unwisely, we think—that his choice again is Agnew.

It is hard to imagine that Nixon, with four years' knowledge of the presidency and eight years' experience as Vice-President, really thinks Spiro Agnew is the best the Republicans can offer as Vice-President. If Nixon is reelected, he will be 60 when his second term begins and has to consider that he would also be choosing his successor, if (to use Nixon's own phrase) "the need arose." Twice in the past 30 years (Truman in 1945, Johnson in 1963) Vice-Presidents have succeeded to office on the death of a President. Twice (Nixon in 1960, Humphrey in 1968) the Vice-President has become the candidate when the President's term was finished. Three times (Truman in 1948, Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1968) former Vice-Presidents have won election in their own right. The vice-presidency is *not* a meaningless office. Clearly the public is entitled to ask



whether a vice-presidential candidate truly has the presidential capacities—understanding of foreign

affairs, a feeling for contemporary domestic problems, a gift for speaking to all elements in the community. Not that all Presidents, or presidential candidates, have these qualities to the same degree (which is what elections are about), but Agnew's demonstrated qualifications in all categories are singularly low.

He can't be said to have grown in office, though the office itself is in part at fault. "The most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived," the first Vice-President, John Adams, called it. To John Nance Garner, it wasn't "worth a pitcher of warm spit." "A cow's fifth teat" was Truman's description. For Nixon it was "a hollow shell—the most ill-conceived, poorly defined position in the American political system." Vice-Presidents coming to the presidency and discovering how much they didn't know (Truman had

never heard about the A-bomb) have vowed to clue their successors in better but haven't.

Nixon was going to be different: he would make Agnew "my chief mediator in jurisdictional disputes—between federal and state governments, between the executive and legislative branches, within the various departments of the federal government." Agnew was also to be the first Vice-President in history to have his office in the White House (that lasted about a year, until presidential aide Bob Haldeman got it instead).

Agnew does attend cabinet and National Security Council meetings, and speaks out, since these seem to be almost the only times he ever sees the President. He officially presides over the Senate but is rarely there; unlike Nixon, Kennedy, Johnson and Humphrey, he was never a senator and has few close friends on the Hill. He presides over a number of commissions, some of them moribund. His most useful service, however intangible the results, is in dealing with mayors and governors. In foreign policy, he didn't learn about Kissinger's trip to China until, off in the Congo, he learned it the same day everyone else did. Perhaps he wasn't told in advance because he had already publicly disparaged Ping Pong diplomacy. Agnew was made chairman of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Policy, but was not one of the top ten Nixon advisers summoned to Camp David to work out Nixon's great economic reversal, the wage-price freeze.

So, left so much to his own devices, he has made himself a household word. He has become the Great Divider. Rev up right-wing audiences, tick-

le the big party contributors with ornate, petty and nasty attacks on the kids, the blacks, the press, the protesters, "sweeping that kind of garbage out of our society." True enough, Agnew often—like George Wallace—articulates what many people are angrily feeling at the moment, and sometimes his criticisms have helped precipitate useful public debate. As he once explained on British TV: "In a desire to be heard, I have to throw them a little red meat once in a while." The Nixon administration practices the same tactics too often, but does have other sides of itself to show, as Agnew does not.

People say Agnew now feels unappreciated. He is a proud self-made man, this Greek immigrant's son. Perhaps he no longer would say, as he said in Chicago in 1970: "If in the process of rendering support, something happens to me politically through the hard partisan role I must play, through being the lightning rod for many of the things I'm saying, then that's the way the ball bounces." He defined his problem well. That's how the ball should have bounced.

Practically speaking, the President, preparing to run against the "leftist" views of George McGovern, scarcely needed to fear right-wing disaffection. The President was thus wholly free to make his VP decision on the grounds that probably most appeal to him—the man who is getting an important lift toward the nomination in 1976 should have been one whose choice in itself enhanced Nixon's own reputation. In Nixon's mind this might well have been his newfound

friend and adviser, John Connally of Texas. But there were other possibles too. Any list of alternatives to Agnew would have included men who have handicaps of their own, but would have been in any case superior to Agnew. Among them he would have named for starters Senators Percy and Brooke or Governor Rockefeller. Others might have put forward Elliot Richardson or Rogers Morton from Nixon's own cabinet, Governors Milliken of Michigan and Holton of Virginia, the vigorous young Mayor Lugar of Indianapolis, Senators Taft and Saxbe of Ohio.

Spiro T. Agnew, being the kind of man he is, said he would step aside willingly if asked, and support the ticket. Even if his replacement's views were "totally hostile to my own," he would "withdraw and shut my mouth." Of course, the flash reaction of his supporters might have made Miami Beach a more exciting convention than the President wished. But the Republicans, we believe, might have found their party's future, and the country's, better for the change.

## Sensible killing

The phrase "senseless killing" keeps turning up. New York's Mayor Lindsay used it again the other day about the shooting of a cab driver. It surfaces all the time in the accounts from Northern Ireland. Bremer's shooting of George Wallace was widely deplored as "senseless." What is sensible killing then? Robbing a cab driver but really getting away with quite a sum? Killing a political figure not for the notoriety of it but because you can't stand his politics? Or perhaps sensible killing is shooting only armed opponents on Belfast streets, or dropping smart bombs that never touch civilians.

## Your move, Bobby

Down at the Marshall Chess Club in Greenwich Village, where chess is a serious and silent business, Bobby Fischer was quickly forgiven once he made a few classy unexpected moves. But for the rest of us, who don't know a Benoni counter-gambit from a Nimzo-Indian defense, it's a little hard to forgive our leading chessman his delays, tantrums, studied discourtesies and moody absences. Maybe it's not a grave international matter, though both the Icelanders and Russians seem to think so, and Henry Kissinger has been on the phone to Reykjavik. Kissinger probably wanted to say how necessary it is to Nixon's game plan that a successful Soviet-American chess match precede Phase II of the SALT talks.

The simplest explanation of Bobby Fischer's conduct is the George Wallace Law, or what can you expect from pointy-head intellectuals? The more sophisticated reading is that Fischer was using the Muhammad Ali opening, the classic strategy of jumping up and down at the weighing-in ceremony, which has the double advantage of psyching your opponent and building up the gate. Either way it's not much of an ad for the capitalist side. Almost makes you wish that Boris Spassky would win.