

Agnew Hits Watergate Obsession

ST. CHARLES, Ill., Sept. 8 (AP)—Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, criticizing "the persecutorial atmosphere hanging over the American political system," said tonight that "morbid" preoccupation with Watergate threatens the government's ability to function.

"It is, therefore, an indirect obstruction of the will of the people," he said.

Agnew made his comments in a speech prepared for delivery before a Kane County Republican rally honoring Leslie C. Arends, a 20-term congressman.

Agnew, whose Maryland gubernatorial campaigns are under federal investigation, said he wouldn't "minimize the lessons of Watergate." But he said "the abuses resulting from the current climate are of much more subtle and tragic proportions."

"The preoccupation with anything and everything related to Watergate is the most obvious, but not necessarily the most insidious by-product of the affair," he said. "Far more dangerous, in my opinion, is the persecutorial atmosphere hanging over the American political system."

The Vice President, who has generally kept himself removed from the Watergate case and has rarely spoken strongly in public about it, said:

"Our opponents will argue that the strength of our free system lies in our willingness to wash our dirty linen in public; and, to some extent, they are right. But even a strong garment cannot be put through the washing machine over and over without wearing it out, and I happen to think that the Watergate jeans are

losing their blue and beginning to fall apart."

"We all know that presidents must take some heat," he said. "Well, President Nixon has been standing there and taking it ever since Senator (Sam) Ervin has been doing his rain dance in that Washington committee room." Ervin is chairman of the Senate Watergate committee.

"The morbid preoccupation with Watergate threatens the ability of a government to concentrate on the problems it was elected to solve," he said.

"Watergate is not only a preoccupation in Washington, it has become something of a parlor game," he told the Illinois audience. "But try to find one of these Watergate experts who knows or cares much about the energy crises, inflation or the problems of the American farmer. Those are currently non-Washington issues and therefore not really worth their serious attention."

He said the Watergate preoccupation hampering the President in carrying out "the programs we were elected to implement."

"I suspect that by 1974 the American people are going to be asking not who yelled loudest about Watergate, but who was out there looking for answers to our economic problems and working for world peace," he said.

"We have reached the watershed of Watergate. In spite of that, it is obvious that some in this country are going to continue to attempt to milk this issue dry," he said. "Those embittered critics of this administration and this party who could not discredit us at the