

Concerned Nixon Assigns Adviser To Oversee Agnew's Campaigning

EVIDENCE that Richard M. Nixon is more disturbed by his running mate's open-mouthed campaign than he lets on is found in his discreet assignment of Stephen Hess, his longtime liberal adviser, to oversee Gov. Spiro T. Agnew.

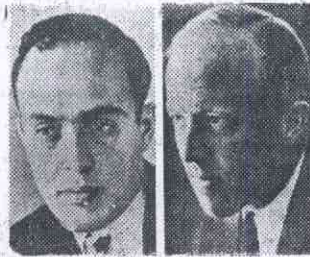
Hess, an author-intellectual blooded in the many Nixon campaigns, originally was assigned to studying transition problems for the Nixon Administration. But the potential for disaster displayed by Agnew in just two weeks on the campaign trail has convinced Nixon he needs a trusted, and cool head like Steve Hess's to represent his interests.

Indeed, Nixon's concern reflects unease over Agnew inside the Republican Party that is deeper than generally realized. Agnew's bizarre campaign record so far not only casts one small cloud on the otherwise bright Republican horizon but reinforces the consensus at Miami Beach in August: The vice presidential selection has been Nixon's only blunder of 1968.

Far from representing obedience to Nixon's commands as claimed by Democrats, Agnew's Red-baiting and onslaughts on Vice President Humphrey have been his own idea. Given the general assignment of countering Democratic attacks (a common role for the vice presidential candidate), Agnew has run wild.

INDEED, Nixon's sin regarding Agnew has not been fashioning him into a hatchet-man but in giving him, until now, too free a hand. John Sears, the bright young Nixon aide and law partner assigned to travel with Agnew, had no major say in Agnew's strategy the first two weeks.

Nor was Agnew fully briefed on policy. In that now famous Sept. 10 meet-



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ing with Washington correspondents when he suggested Humphrey was "soft on communism," Agnew also delivered less publicized but equally injudicious pronouncements on Vietnam—flatly ruling out a coalition government in Saigon. That's not Nixon's position. Rep. Melvin Laird of Wisconsin, a member of Nixon's informal strategy board, has emphatically advised against such a restrictive stance.

Although Agnew's hard line was applauded by Republican regulars, party liberals exploded in private. Former Gov. William Scranton of Pennsylvania, an Establishment pillar fully committed to Nixon, demanded that something be done about Agnew. Sen. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, who has risked his standing among Negroes by all-out support of Nixon, vainly tried to reason with Agnew; Brooke reported to friends he found Agnew "very inflexible" on the law-and-order issue.

What finally convinced Agnew that he ought to retract his ludicrous charges against Humphrey was a suggestion, passed indirectly to Agnew, from Nixon headquarters.

EVEN THAT retraction, however, did not fully extinguish the sense of outrage on the Republican left. It was brought home to Agnew in Rochester, N.Y., on Sept. 12 when he heard Dutch-uncle lectures in private from

New York's two Republican Senators—Jacob Javits, seeking reelection this year, and the newly appointed Charles Goodell, who may have to run next year.

Javits was characteristically vehement. He informed Agnew that he had been making strong endorsements of the Nixon-Agnew ticket and that Agnew's wild statements were acutely embarrassing to him. Should they continue, Javits suggested, he might have to dilute his support. A stony-faced Agnew listened without comment.

It is partly to save Republican liberals from more embarrassment that Nixon now is taking a discreet but firm interest in Agnew's performance. In addition to Hess's being attached to Agnew's party, another astute Nixon lieutenant—New York publicist William Safire—has been coordinating problems with Agnew. Rep. John Rhodes, the level-headed conservative from Arizona who ably represented Nixon's interests on the Platform Committee in Miami Beach, also is now riding with Agnew.

WHETHER all this is effective is a matter of some doubt for seasoned Agnew-watchers in Maryland. Ever since Agnew won popular acclaim with his condemnation of Negro leaders this spring, he has been unalterably convinced that he instinctively holds the certain pulse of public sentiment.

This frame of mind concerns thoughtful Republicans less by its impact on Nov. 5 than on the future. An inept vice presidential candidate seldom loses an election where his running-mate is so far in front as Nixon. Rather, Agnew's performance is disturbing because it casts doubts on his fitness as heir apparent to national power. With the help of Nixon's lieutenants, it will be up to Agnew to erase those doubts by his record the next six weeks.