

F. Y. I.

Post 5/24/74

DURING THE CAMPAIGN of 1972, when Spiro T. Agnew was still very much a household word, the former Vice President spent a great deal of time harping on a particular theme. It was his argument in those pre-landslide and pre-discovery days that the disclosures in the press of the Watergate scandal were nothing more than the mean-spirited mischief of this and other newspapers. For example, in a "Meet the Press" appearance on Oct. 29, 1972, Mr. Agnew said—and this presumably was spontaneous expression—that The Washington Post "has engaged in a veritable paroxysm of individual vendettas against the President in this regard."

Mr. Agnew said much more on that and other occasions. In September of 1972, he went as far as to say of the burglars caught inside Watergate: "Someone set up these people and encouraged them to undertake this caper to embarrass them and to embarrass the Republican party." The inference the former Vice President would have had the American people draw from such rhetoric was that only in such a way could Watergate be explained. The rectitude of this administration, of course, would permit no other plausible explanation. Given that public record, it came as something of a surprise to read the recently published memoirs of Jeb Stuart Magruder, who played a rather crucial role in the early stages of Watergate and its subsequent cover-up. We would like to pass along—For Your Information—and for the light it sheds on the relationship between the press and the government, a brief passage from the book which has to do with the state of Mr. Agnew's actual knowledge of the Watergate affair. We pick up Magruder's account of his discussion with Mr. Agnew

just after a hard round of tennis doubles, to which Mr. Agnew had invited him in the apparent hope of getting a line on Watergate. The date was June 20, 1972, three days after the break-in.

"Jeb, what the hell is going on?"

My instinct was to be candid. "It was our operation," I said. "It got screwed up. We're trying to take care of it."

Agnew frowned and looked away. "I don't think we ought to discuss it again, in that case."

In other words, from that point forward, Mr. Agnew was aware that this abortive operation was the work of the committee that was established to re-elect the President—and by extension, the Vice President as well. And what was his reaction upon learning that startling fact from the deputy director of the committee? Was it to press for details? Or to notify the authorities? No, this celebrated advocate of law and order could think of nothing better to say than that he didn't want to hear any more. Then, three months later, we find him raising the specter of an entrapment plot designed to embarrass his party—a spectre he knew full well was false. Meantime he was heaping scorn on the press for pursuing the real scandal of Watergate—a scandal he well knew to be real. They say that Mr. Agnew was programmed to say all the nasty—or silly—things he said about the press. Even so, it scarcely seems possible that even such a man as Spiro Agnew, knowing what he knew, could quite bring himself to talk of "distortions" in the press coverage of Watergate.