



Agnew with Congressional supporters: The bright spots were few

Spiro Agnew on the Spot

No politician makes it to the Vice Presidency without learning to live with political pressure, but the ordeal of Spiro T. Agnew last week was perhaps unmatched in American history. Cut adrift by his own President, beleaguered by rumors of imminent resignation in the face of a Federal grand jury investigation, parked in limbo by most Republican Party leaders, Agnew seemed for most of last week to be one step away from tossing in his hand and going home to Maryland. But all week long he clung defiantly to both his office and his protestations of innocence, and his aides promised that he would come out fighting this week—in court maneuvers, in political speeches and with a dramatic plea for public support.

Whatever the ultimate outcome, it was something of a triumph merely to have lasted out the week. A blizzard of rumors from the White House foretold his resignation and proclaimed his despair; supposedly authoritative reports pictured him haggling like a felon caught with the goods, offering to resign and plead guilty if the charges were reduced. With little appetite for the prospect, Congress was boning up on the technicalities of impeachment—and giving even more thought to the choice of a new Vice President.

Agnew hung tough, but he paid a high price. Richard Nixon evidently wanted his resignation; just as clearly, by one view, Agnew hoped to trade his departure and cooperation for an assur-

ance that he would be treated gently. But in delicate negotiations, the deal didn't jell. After Agnew reportedly turned down the President's request for a resignation in an hour-long confrontation in Mr. Nixon's Executive Office Building hideaway, the Vice President was on his own—and in the cold. If he were to escape indictment, he would have to win a plea of constitutional immunity and thus in effect put pressure on Congress for his own impeachment. As his lawyers prepared to do just that this week, aides passed the word that Agnew planned fighting speeches to rally his constituency. They also announced an "Agnew defense fund" to raise money for a long legal battle.

What Agnew had going for him were the constitutionally mandated independence of his office, the loyalty of a surprising number of friends—and a testy instinct for survival. More than 100 congressmen signed a sort of get-well card—a poster of a kitten dangling tenaciously from a pole, with the caption: "Hang in there, baby." To combat the impression that he was isolated in his battle, his office announced that his mail was running about 85 to 1 in favor of his remaining in office. And this week the Vice President was to test the popular winds personally with a speaking tour in California. "My God, what do I have to do to convince people that I'm not quitting?" he asked an intimate last week. "Last month I said I was elected to serve four years and that I was going to

serve out my term. I meant it then and I mean it now."

As far as the nation at large was concerned, most people seemed to agree with the Vice President—for now. A special telephone poll commissioned by NEWSWEEK and conducted by The Gallup Organization last week showed that 89 per cent of a national sampling was fully aware that Agnew is under investigation by a grand jury, but that 66 per cent did not believe that he should step down solely for this reason. If he is indicted, however, the picture would

SHOULD AGNEW QUIT? —A NEWSWEEK POLL

How does the American public feel about Spiro Agnew? Newsweek commissioned The Gallup Organization late last week to survey reaction to the Agnew investigation. Telephone interviewers talked to a representative cross section of 631 Americans. The full questionnaire, and its results:

As you may know, Federal prosecutors are investigating Vice President Agnew on possible bribery charges during the period when he held political office in Maryland. Had you heard about this investigation?

YES **89%** NO **11%**

change—58 per cent of those polled indicated they felt he should resign in that event. But the poll showed an unmistakable undercurrent of sympathy for the VP in his ordeal—and a strong suspicion that Mr. Nixon might not be treating him fairly (box).

However judicious and restrained the rest of the country, Washington was a caldron of innuendo, Delphic leaks and implausible scenarios—a million massed straws lending weight not so much to the speculation that Agnew would depart as to the apparent certainty that the White House fervently wished he would. The Washington Post's David Broder, perhaps the solidest political reporter in the capital, set the pot aboil on Tuesday by quoting "a senior Republican figure, strongly in Agnew's corner," as saying that he was "99½ per cent certain [Agnew] will resign—and probably this week." No one was able to discover where the quote came from, but much of the guessing pointed at a high Administration official.

A Barrage of Innuendoes

At the White House itself, while deputy press secretary Gerald Warren clung to the official line that it would be unseemly to comment on Agnew's troubles, senior White House aides passed out anonymous but remarkably pointed hints that Agnew was about to resign, that Mr. Nixon was already considering his successor—and that Agnew was bargaining to reduce the charges he may face from a Baltimore grand jury currently investigating accusations of bribery, extortion, tax fraud and conspiracy, dating mainly from his years as Baltimore county executive and Maryland governor. The innuendoes piled high enough to provoke conservative Sen. James L. Buckley and liberal Sen. Edward Kennedy into speaking out almost simultaneously against what Kennedy



Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post

The President in the Cabinet Room: The demurrers were high-minded

called the "kangaroo trial" being waged by "the White House and the Department of Justice."

What nearly everyone outside the White House seemed to agree on was that Agnew had nothing whatever to gain by resigning. Resignation would automatically end his right to interpose the constitutional challenge and leave him bare to such ordinary indignities as a subpoena. If the courts were to concur in a claim of immunity, Agnew still might face impeachment proceedings in the House and trial by the Senate. Neither

chamber has so far displayed much taste for tying itself up in lengthy and inevitably bitter impeachment proceedings, but the Washington mood is explosively unpredictable; in the end, Spiro Agnew could find himself running interference for President Nixon himself on the impeachment course.

Even if the courts were to rule that the Vice President could be indicted, trial-wise lawyers point out that the nation's second-ranking political leader stands a significantly better chance of winning acquittal than a man who has unfrocked himself of that office. The case against Agnew, said one Maryland insider who has seen some of the evidence, is "all locked up"—but that estimate may not take into account the overpowering presence of a sitting Vice President in the courtroom. Whatever the contingency, Agnew's friends and aides were unanimously emphatic last week that there was no plausible course that might lead to a quick Agnew departure. "The Vice President is not going to resign," said columnist Victor Gold, Agnew's former press secretary and fieriest partisan. "They'd have to dynamite him out of the office."

That reading, of course, assumed that Agnew had no interest in copping a plea—a point on which supposedly authoritative accounts differed widely. Agnew himself slid through his week of mortification with a fixed rictus of a public grin and no words whatever in his own defense ("I do not comment on stories from

President Nixon has declined to comment about the charges against Agnew. A few weeks ago he expressed confidence in Agnew's conduct while Vice President, but he has refused to go beyond that. Do you think Nixon is being fair or unfair to Agnew?

FAIR **40%** UNFAIR **35%** DON'T KNOW **25%**

Do you think Agnew should resign now or not?

YES **16%** NO **66%** DON'T KNOW **18%**

Do you think Agnew should resign if he is indicted on bribery or other charges or not?

YES **58%** NO **30%** DON'T KNOW **12%**

I am going to read you the names of six men. If Agnew leaves office, which one of them would be your first choice to replace him as Vice President? Your second choice?

	1st Choice	2nd Choice
John Connally	24%	16%
William Rogers	4%	7%
Barry Goldwater	19%	14%
Nelson Rockefeller	14%	14%
Howard Baker	15%	11%
Elliot Richardson	5%	7%

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undisclosed sources"). Beyond the meeting with Mr. Nixon—arranged at his own request—and several huddles with his lawyers, Agnew took no apparent action at all to resolve the crisis. He spent most of his days in his office, tending to paperwork chores and popping hard pretzels from an old-fashioned drugstore jar.

Agnew called no staff meetings to map strategy, and he left the telephoning to friends who felt like getting in touch with him. "He tends to withdraw and even sulk at times, like Achilles," said one crony. "Although he's a gut fighter on public issues, on personal issues he tends to be a very private man, and maybe not even as strong as some might imagine." One politician who called him to offer sympathy—Georgia's Democratic Gov. Jimmy Carter—reported that Agnew "felt like he was fighting a battalion with a platoon," and a Democratic senator who visited him said that Agnew physically "looked like 50 cents."

A Word of Caution

The Vice President's only public appearances were at a luncheon, reception and state dinner for Pakistan's visiting Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—and these were as humiliating as everything else in his long week. At the dinner, Agnew and his wife were hustled directly by ushers into the White House East Room instead of waiting to accompany the guests of honor, a shift of protocol apparently designed to keep them out of sight. At the Bhutto luncheon, one experienced political wife pointed toward Judy Agnew and whispered: "Do you think this is the last time she'll be hostess at one of these things?" But Mrs. Agnew maintained her smile even through a dinner seated next to Mel Laird, the President's new domestic-affairs adviser and the reported source of at least some of the rumors making Agnew's life miserable.

Agnew's reticence did not preclude a storm of countercharges from his friends and staffers. The excitable Gold at one point became so exasperated with the executive rumor factory ("they want Agnew's head on a platter, like John the Baptist's") that he accused Mel Laird and chief of staff Alexander Haig of leading a White House cabal against the Vice President—an accusation that Laird coolly denied. But the mortar fire across West Executive Avenue finally prompted Agnew, one source said, to caution his aides against retaliation. "It's not good for the President. It's not good for me. It's not good for the Republican Party. And

it's especially not good for the country."

Mr. Nixon's personal profile was as low as the Vice President's. The President spent the week in well-advertised labors in the Oval Office—the fourth week in a row, his aides proudly noted, in which he had ventured no farther afield than Camp David—and confined his official thoughts on Agnew to high-minded demurrers issued through Gerald Warren. "The President is aware of the stories," Warren conceded after the Broder piece appeared. "He reads the newspapers in general circulation in the Washington area." But "because the matter of the



Richardson: Talk but no deals

Vice President is under investigation," Warren told reporters the next day, "we feel it inappropriate for the White House to comment or accept questions the answers to which would pass judgment on the situation."

If those were the President's wishes, he failed fairly spectacularly in making them known to his subordinates. Agnew, one high Administration official acknowledged, "has become an embarrassment just when we are getting control of things again. There is no way he can be anything else for months, or maybe even for the rest of the President's term. We don't need a Vice President who has been scrimmaging with a grand jury. No matter if he gets off, the smell remains."

While most top aides were a good

deal more discreet than that, the White House pressure play moved forward with less than its usual smooth coordination. Under the normal ground rules of the Washington rumor dance, a reporter gets his signal when lines suddenly open to top officials; they then respond to his questions with exquisite nuance and appropriate facial expressions, and he has an exclusive inside tip. Last week, however, the system seemed to be operating wholesale.

"I think it goes without saying that the prosecution would be less stringent if [Agnew] resigns," one high-ranking aide told a White House newsmen "in deepest background"—and again: "I don't know, of course, but I really think resignation is in the cards." The reporter rushed off to file his exclusive, only to find that the same delicate nuances, from similar high White House sources, had found their way into the notebooks of several other White House correspondents—all without identification of the sources and all without Richard Nixon's fingerprints anywhere in sight (if indeed they deserved to be).

In the end, the high-level whispers and mutters added up, in effect, to a widely disseminated and perhaps vitally important White House attitude. And it was an attitude for which the Administration, as usual, need not accept any responsibility.

Searching for a Compromise

The official rumor game has been played that way for decades; what keeps reporters on the hook is the modest but tangible chance that the leaks may point toward the truth. And the fiercer the denials of resignation from the Agnew camp last week, the more insistent became the rumors that the Vice President, through his lawyers, was indeed negotiating with the Justice Department for a vastly reduced criminal charge against him in exchange for his quick and uncomplicated departure.

Plea bargaining is a commonplace if somewhat distasteful way of settling criminal cases, but with the atmosphere of Watergate hovering over Washington, the danger was that it would look more like a cover-up. The problem was to find a compromise easy enough to appeal to Agnew, but severe enough to protect Attorney General Elliot Richardson from charges of political hanky-panky. CBS's respected Fred Graham reported that Agnew's lawyers were holding out for total immunity before he would resign—a demand that Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen, with Richardson by his side, reportedly rejected with the comment: "We've got the evidence; we've got it cold." To complicate the issue, Richardson would not rule on the constitutional issue himself—an option that could have barred prosecution of the Veep and sent the case on to Congress. Furthermore, no one in the Administration could guarantee that Agnew, if he did resign, would not be prose-

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*SYNDICATE TIES ?

cut by state authorities in Maryland.

The plea-bargaining reports also tinted speculation about the substance of Agnew's private meeting with Mr. Nixon—their first such encounter since Sept. 1. White House aides were willing to let reporters assume the obvious—that the two leaders had discussed the only issue they had to discuss—but for once a real lid was placed on the proceedings. One White House aide reported that Agnew looked "discouraged" when he emerged, but Agnew's press secretary, J. Marsh Thomson, refused to concede any significance to that. "It's understandable," he said. "It's a rough ball game and the arrows are coming hot and heavy."

Still Another Blockbuster?

Behind all of last week's frontline gossip lay a second layer of rumor that sought to make the whole picture clear. According to one oddly persistent scenario, the Maryland prosecutors had stumbled over "something big" in their researches into Agnew's past, something that would morally dwarf the nickel-ante kickbacks and favors that Agnew is whispered to have commanded in his Maryland years. The White House, in this version, was simply trying to persuade Agnew to give up his office and immunity and stand trial on the lesser charges lest any protracted constitutional

or impeachment struggle bring the purported blockbuster to light.

The blockbuster rumor was of a piece with the rest of the White House float, but with a few curiosities of its own. When NEWSWEEK's Evert Clark put the question of something big to an excellently placed Administration official last week, the official became visibly upset. "The political structure cannot take it," he said, "not on top of Watergate and the other Agnew thing. The President would go bananas. If he didn't, I know the White House staff would. If anyone has any evidence of that, they should take it to the Congressional leadership, or the party leadership, or the President, even. And a decision should be made that the country cannot take this."

If that were the case, of course, the White House would be deliberately sitting on critical evidence—but it might not be the first time. NEWSWEEK learned from two dependable sources that the President almost certainly was told about some aspect of Agnew's Maryland troubles as long ago as August of 1972—before the Republican convention. According to these informants, Mr. Nixon totted up the various political equations—the looming campaign against Sen. George McGovern (whose embarrassments over Sen. Thomas Eagleton were cautionary), the muffled but still-ticking Watergate