

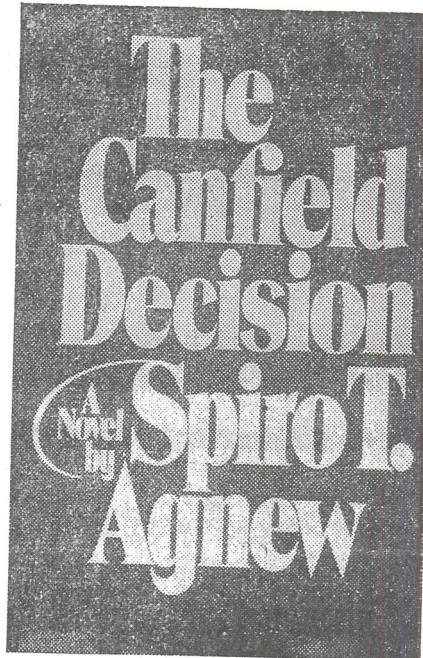
Between the Lines

By William McPherson

It was not snobbery (effete intellectual variety) or even a liberal conspiracy that kept my mind from concentrating on your novel, Mr. Agnew. It was, simply, a failure of the will which allowed my eyes to glaze as your plot twisted slowly, slowly in the dying wind. There was a serious problem in maintaining "maximum eye contact"—your phrase, Spiro—with the pages that seemed to unroll from 38, where it is written that "he expertly refueled his masticating machine and continued"—not to eternity at all but only to page 344.

Former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew's book, "The Canfield Decision" (Playboy Press — \$8.95) is heavy, heavy on plot, as devious and almost as imaginative as a Chinese puzzle, and as slow to unravel, albeit picking up suspense toward the end when the blood begins to flow. Vice President Porter Canfield is rich, aristocratic and liberal; bored with his wife and dazzled by that "graceful swirl of femininity," the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare; and ambitious.

He intends to succeed the lame duck (and lame-brained) President Hurley in the election of 1984. To wrest the nomination from his rival and the President's favorite, Canfield breaks openly with Administration foreign policy and plays shamelessly to domestic liberal (i.e., Jewish) opinion. "Americans have watched with great approval and sympathy the struggles of Israel,"



Canfield intones; "yes, and where necessary Americans have intervened to keep Israel from being swallowed up by an unfair coalition of forces." The applause was "hardly thunderous. After all, less than 15 per cent of the crowd was Jewish. Down at the press table, where less than 15 per cent was not Jewish, the reaction was ecstatic."

Soon enough there is a Middle-Eastern crisis, fomented not by the

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Israelis, the Arabs, or even by the Russians but by the Iranians, who fear Soviet intervention in the Persian Gulf. To divert Russian attention from the Shah's kingdom, a Soviet-American confrontation over Israel is arranged through the aid of an Iranian cabal and a militant Zionist organization in New York.

Assassinations abound — Arab terrorists, natch. Only they're not. Only they are. Well, are they really? Chinese, maybe? For they are quietly, cleverly into this nightmare act, too.

That's the idea, worked out at considerable length and in a style which will be familiar to aficionados of Agnewisms: the alliteration ("all eyes were glued on the gladiator about to enter the arena"), the erudition ("esurience satisfied," "epideictic orations," "her erubescence neck"), the fascination with words and images ("the tranquil pool of slaked desire").

THE CANFIELD DECISION. By Spiro T. Agnew.

(Playboy Press, 344 pages, \$8.95)

The rhetoric has a familiar ring, too: "It was the mewling, crawling condition of the United States that encouraged the arrogant international violence." And the philosophy: "Leadership was a terrible burden, but those who were called to important tasks must bear up under the strain." And the excuses: "It's a hell of a thing when your whole life is ruined because you listened to your friends and let some kook get too close to you."

The morality, insofar as it can be discerned, is simple: "We haven't done anything illegal. What is a moral obligation? . . . Are we not morally obligated to do what we can do to prevent the eventual enslavement of the world by Communist dictators? Is the moral obligation to report an individual murder, committed by mistake,

greater than these moral obligations?"

Leaks are bad: "The amoral leak was something new . . . the leaker took upon himself the divine task of assigning moral standards, in this way becoming amoral—not to be judged by external criteria of morality . . . the amoral leaker, taking a leaf from revolutionaries, rewrote the commandments to suit his own needs. He characterized as immoral whatever he attacked . . . and ignored the immorality of subverting the orderly processes of an elected government."

The press isn't much good, either: "Pulitzer-worshipping gossips," hard-drinking "newsies" who "really scarf it up, especially the writers."

Speaking of drinks, you'll need something stronger than Gatorade to help you through this novel. Maybe a sip or two of Wild Turkey, which will blend nicely with this turkey of a book.

The reviewer is the editor of Book World.