

# Royko

Weep not

for Spiro

10/11/73



Early last year I received a phone call from Spiro Agnew's press secretary.

He said the vice president was upset about something I had written and wanted to talk to me about it.

The column in question had been about a speech Agnew had given in Chicago. In the speech, he made crude, cheap remarks about people on welfare.

As his press secretary put it, I had "peeled his hide off" with my column.

We set up a date and a couple of weeks later Agnew and I sat down in his suite in a Chicago hotel and talked for about 45 minutes.

He took his usual tough approach. Boiled down it came to this: There is too much cheating on welfare and I didn't know what the hell I was writing about.

When he finished, I said:

"For a man in your position, the vice president of the United States, to keep carping about the poorest people in America, makes you a bully.

"I would have some respect for you if once — just once — you would make the same kind of speech about the big fat cats who cheat on their income taxes."

I EXPECTED TO DRAW SOME KIND of response, even an angry one. But he said nothing. He just looked at me for a moment, then shrugged and changed the subject.

I mention that conversation today because Mr. Agnew just pleaded no contest — in effect, guilty — to cheating on his income tax.

I have no way of knowing if his lack of response during our conversation had anything to do with the guilty knowledge already locked in his brain — and his tax records.

But I'd like to think he did. I'd like to think that at that moment he might have recognized what a hypocrite he was.

And that's why I have no sympathy for him, although in two long conversations I found him to be a likable person.

I might have felt some sympathy if he had failed to pay taxes on money he had worked hard to earn.

That's what he liked to preach about—that people should support themselves through good, honest work.

But the money amounted to graft, kickbacks, out of the hands of contractors when he was governor of Maryland.

If he sweated for that kind of money, it wasn't from honest labor, but from nervousness that he might get caught. It was money he did nothing to earn, except by abusing a position of trust and power.

YET HE COULD STAND UP IN PUBLIC and sneer at women who might hide the fact that they make a few bucks a month baby-sitting because they are afraid their welfare payments would be reduced.

He could sneer at people who bend the rules set up by bureaucrats because they are trying to get their families through another day, another meal, while living at the bottom of every social and economic ladder we have in this country.

He could sneer at people who "cheat," to use his word, because they are trying to survive.

To survive. Not to play golf with Frank Sinatra at a millionaire's resort in Palm Springs, or to build a palatial home, or to buy elegantly tailored suits and alligator golf bags. But merely to survive.

He could sneer at them while stuffing his pockets like a Chicago alderman, and then go one step further and cheat the government out of its lawful share of his graft.

And he could sneer at them for the cynical purpose of playing upon the country's worst prejudices for political reasons.

So I can't feel any more compassion for him than he showed for the people who have never had the chance, as he did, to live the good life.

I HOPE THAT MR. AGNEW doesn't try to blame his downfall on the press.

No reporters told him to take money from contractors.

No reporters told him to cheat on his income tax.

The advice he got from the press is basically the same that the press has given to politicians since the days that type was first set by hand in this country.

And the advice is simple enough: Play it honest and remember that you are working for the people.

If he had taken that advice, he'd be teeing off without a worry on his mind.