

Joseph Alsop

The Agnew Decision

Vice President Agnew's abrupt resignation and plea make several things clear; and they also raise several questions. It is best to begin with what is made clear, for the questions are the opposite of firmly answerable as these words are written.

Now that the Vice President's ordeal is over by his own decision and the Justice Department's consent, the watchword here is to be compassionate. Unlike most Washington watchwords, it is a good one. Consider the situation of a fairly poorly paid county official of small means—which Spiro T. Agnew was before he became governor of Maryland.

In a place like Baltimore County, in these last two decades, a single change of zoning has been enough to make several very large fortunes. Even a sewer permit has been worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some states, like Maryland, have a long tradition of political office as a profitable way of life. So it is easy enough to see how Agnew found himself in trouble.

That much being said, however, it must be further said that a good many tears have been falsely shed in recent weeks. Vice presidents are, by definition, politicians who have scaled the heights, whether by luck or good management. Experienced politicians who have scaled the heights simply do not offer resignations and enter pleas when the charges against them can be successfully denied.

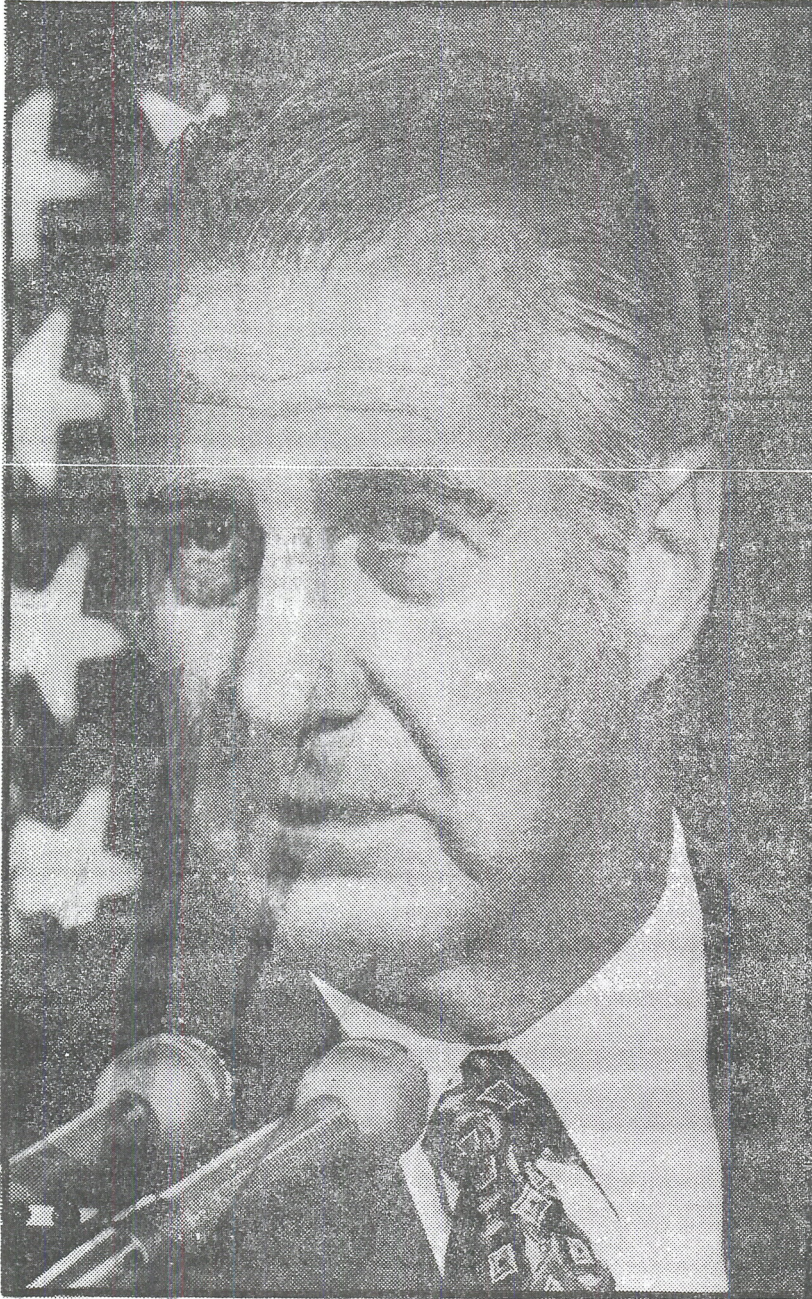
In this case, the Justice Department's massive 40-page statement of the facts in the case makes plain that this was a case that went a bit further than the zoning change-sewer permit sort of thing. For example, there were those 5 per cent fees paid by winners of engineering contracts—and there were a lot of mighty fat engineering contracts. Furthermore, the Justice Department's statement of facts was presented for public perusal by agreement with the Agnew defense team, and therefore with Spiro T. Agnew himself.

Yet the Justice Department has previously been accused of being far too hard on the Vice President, and being "out to get him." A considerable number of rightwing Republicans even believe that the President was out to get his own Vice President—that Richard M. Nixon was craftily trying to make Spiro Agnew a scapegoat for his own troubles.

All that can now be seen to have been pure hogwash. The wonder is, rather, why the Vice President and his lawyers broke off their negotiations with the Justice Department in September. The same terms were open to the Agnew team then that were accepted this week. The Vice President was asked to resign, to plead guilty of income tax avoidance, and to submit to the Justice Department's statement of all the facts. In September, these terms were angrily rejected.

One has to conclude, therefore, that the aim in September was to experiment with the effects of a political offensive against both the White House and the Justice Department for a matter of two weeks. One can see no purpose, unless it was the hope that hell-raising would secure better terms.

On Friday, October 5, however, the



Justice Department was abruptly notified by the Agnew lawyers that they would like to resume the negotiations that had been so openly broken off. The old terms were offered once again by Attorney General Elliot Richardson. This time, after a little haggling about details, the terms were promptly accepted. You could have no clearer justification of the course the department and the White House have followed.

In the light of the Justice Department statement of facts, the President and the attorney general are in truth seen to have treated the Vice President pretty gently.

Surely they were wise to do so. On the one hand, the country has quite enough constitutional problems on its hands already, at any rate until the question of the famous Nixon tapes is settled. But if that hurdle can be got over and with the Agnew problem solved, on the other hand, the country can perhaps wade out of the swamp of crippling political troubles at long last.

As to the questions raised by the Vice President's departure, they are obvious enough. What replacement will the President ask the Senate and House to approve? And will the Congress accept the choice the President offers? There is no solid answer.

Yet a solid Republican vote, plus a solid Southern Democratic vote, will still add up to a majority for the President. If he can be sure of this kind of addition, he can ignore the fury of the leftwing Democrats, who are coming closer and closer to claiming that it is the President's duty to name one of themselves to replace Agnew. But the "if" in that formula is very big indeed.

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