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A Year of Disillusionment for Conservatives

The anguished sense of betrayal by Republican conservatives toward Spiro T. Agnew, scarcely relieved by his televised valedictory Monday night, derived from the former Vice President's remarkable success in deceiving them the last two months—typified by his Aug. 13 visit to a political bullroast on Maryland's eastern shore.

Agnew traveled that day to Centerville, Md., to boost Robert Bauman, a young conservative state senator running for a congressional vacancy. As Agnew passed through the crowd shaking hands after his speech, he seemed heartened by expressions of confidence in his innocence. Arriving at his waiting helicopter, the Vice President told Bauman how good it was to get free of the Washington malaise if only for a while and then, in his cool, confident manner, said flatly he was being framed on charges of bribery and extortion.

Bauman (elected to Congress three days later) believed Agnew and supported him, publicly and privately. But long before that bullroast Bauman had

fastened on Agnew as his leader. A former national chairman of the Young Americans for Freedom, Bauman looked to Agnew as a steady beacon of conservatism in sharp preference to the ideological waverings of President Nixon.

Bauman was not alone in either his acceptance of Agnew's innocence or his preference for him over Mr. Nixon. Thus, the anguish of such conservative Republican politicians today is twofold: not only has their leader been revealed as a common crook, but the very conservative doctrine he has been preaching for five years is now tainted. Was he synthetic from the start?

What adds to the burden for these politicians is that their conservative followers even now maintain a naive faith in the fallen Vice President. In the past week, many a conservative congressman has studied with mounting horror the Justice Department's 40-page recounting of Agnew's venality, only to go back to his district and find constituents willing to believe Agnew was the victim of a liberal conspiracy.

The Monday night telecast further bolstered the remaining true believers.

That poses a problem even for the Republican Party's Mr. Conservative: Sen. Barry Goldwater. In the week since Agnew was forced out of office, Goldwater's office has been swamped with mail defending Agnew and railing against the Nixon administration.

These letter writers are unaware that, according to a close Goldwater associate, "Agnew looked Barry in the eye and told him he was innocent—a straight-out lie." Goldwater accepted it on face value. On the very day Agnew appeared in federal court, Goldwater was preaching the Vice President's innocence to a breakfast of 80 conservative congressmen (though Agnew's office unsuccessfully tried to warn Goldwater that morning).

The most famous Agnew profession of innocence was his Sept. 29 fighting speech to the National Federation of Republican Women, in Los Angeles, promising never to resign even if indicted. But his private assurances were

even stronger—as in closed-door remarks to a luncheon of Republican senators in Washington Sept. 26.

Agnew assured the senators he was guilty of "no wrongdoing" but that his civil liberties had been violated by unscrupulous prosecutors. He pledged never to resign even if requested by the President, adding he would remove himself from the White House complex to Capitol Hill to fulfill constitutional office as president of the Senate while fighting the charges. Although the luncheon was attended by Republican liberals long at odds with the Vice President, they tended to trust him and sympathize with him that day.

All the more natural, then, that conservatives—including some in the White House—should accept Agnew's words at face value. But that ready acceptance has now led some more thoughtful conservatives to ponder hard thoughts.

To pledge that he would never resign while authorizing his lawyers to bargain with prosecutors over his res-

ignation may be more than simple deception but may also involve confusion with reality. Those who personally heard Agnew's face-to-face promises to keep fighting now suspect he may really have believed himself at that moment even while acquiescing in plea bargaining at the same time. Similarly, they wonder whether Agnew, through the last two months and in his Monday night speech, really believed he had done nothing wrong despite convincing Justice Department evidence.

Thus, agonizing questions are posed for conservatives: was Agnew's transformation from liberal governor of Maryland to champion of hard-hat conservatism similarly devoid of true philosophical commitment? Was he merely using his natural gift for credibility as he did the last two months from his Aug. 8 press conference down to Monday night's speech?

To conservatives who have lost their hero, these dark questions eclipse any of the Watergate horrors in this year of disillusionment and betrayal.