

President Agnew?

Since the existence of the famous White House tapes was revealed, it again seems possible that Vice President Spiro Agnew may become President before 1976. It is also entirely possible that he may be elected in his own right in 1976. He is, in short, at least as likely as any other man to be our next President. What sort of President?

The question is, of course, unanswerable. But in a long talk with the Vice President, it is possible to get a sort of smell of the man, a sense of his style and flavor. It understandably takes a good deal of prodding to get him to talk about two interesting subjects—the presidency and Watergate.

"Here we have a time when the President of the United States is under rather heavy attack," he says, "and I'm Vice President of the United States. When we get into discussions of what kind of President I would make, it has to be a rather gauche

the middle of the game." There is hardly a big business in the United States that does not have "controversy with some agency of the federal government." Therefore, if every "major corporate official in the United States" who makes a political contribution is to be suspected of trying to "get favored treatment with a regulatory agency," then "we're not going to be able to finance campaigns"—at least in the way they have been financed in the past.

Maybe, therefore, campaigns should be financed in another way. "As a matter of fact, I'm beginning to come around to the point of view that they should be financed publicly, even though some abuses would still go on. The real problem is to make certain that every serious candidate has enough money to put on a creditable

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kind of interview from his standpoint." Here the Vice President smiles a small, controlled smile.

In any case, he says of the presidency. I'm not hungry for it. Whether I become hungry I can't predict at this moment, but I promise you I won't run if I'm not. If I cannot stimulate my appetite to the point where I'm hungry enough to want it very badly . . . I wouldn't do it, because I think the country deserves someone who is totally committed, dedicated . . ."

If his appetite is sufficiently stimulated by 1974, he will go all out for the nomination. There is no way, he says, to by pass the long hard primary route. He believes that the time has passed when an incumbent president could choose his party's candidate. Of the backing of the President, he says, "I really don't think that means a great deal."

As for Watergate, he believes that President Nixon must and will answer the charges against him, but that he ought not to do so in "the frantic atmosphere" of a wide-open press conference. He thinks that a few "highly respected individuals"—perhaps half a dozen—from television and the press should conduct "an interrogation, but with dignity and with the prestige of the people who would be doing it clearly established."

There are, he says, "complicating factors" (that a lot of people don't fully grasp) in regard to the famous White House tapes. For example, "suppose the President had a foreign principal, and one of the congressional leaders, and Mr. [John W.] Dean, and two or three other visitors, all on the same tape." The tape would have to be edited—the foreign and congressional leaders would have to be snipped off. "Then you would get into the situation where someone would say, well, now, wait a minute, how much did you snip?" . . .

As for himself, he says, "It's a personal belief" that he is so clearly uninvolved in Watergate. "But there's a malaise about the whole thing." For one thing, there is unfairness—"Suddenly the rules are changed in

campaign." But who is a serious candidate?

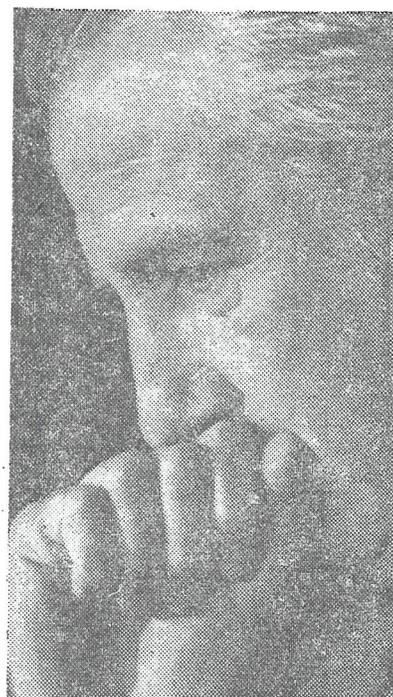
There are some subjects the Vice President would much rather talk about than Watergate and the presidency. He feels strongly about these subjects, and they are rather surprising subjects. There is, for example, "the density of the population."

"I have had this thought in my mind for so long," he says, "that the cost of government is controllable only as the density of population is controllable." Another subject on which he feels strongly is what he perceives as the new American utopianism. "The great-

est problem facing the country today is that we have become utopians. We are never satisfied with achievable, measurable gains. We insist on utopia."

An example of utopianism, says Mr. Agnew, is the American attitude toward poverty. It is not enough that there are now fewer poor people than ever before in any country's history. Poverty has to be abolished. "Poverty is a relative status. Not having what others have, or what most others have, is poverty."

Another subject about which he still feels deeply is the relationship between the media and the government. "The biggest problem with communicating information about public people to the American public lies in the fact



that there is no way to get below the derma . . . Everything is a skin prick." (Derma? Yes, derma. There it is in the dictionary: "the sensitive layer of skin below the epidermis.")

Recalling his early days as Vice President, Agnew sounds like an older boy recalling the painful time when he was a new boy at school. He would take 12 briefing books home, he says, and "study for a week," when he had to go on a television talk show. "Suppose they ask me about our policy in Colombia . . . Suppose they ask me about the rules of the Senate . . . Suppose they ask me about geography . . . Well, it's frightening when you're brand new."

Like many new boys, the Vice President was hurt. "The first thing that hurts a man deeply, if he hasn't been exposed to it, is ridicule. I was the buffoon, if you recall, before I became the hated and feared spokesman of reaction." At this point, the Vice President laughs a short, explosive laugh.

One is left with the impression that the Vice President's derma is more sensitive than that of most politicians. One is left also with the impression that this is a much odder and more unusual man than the stereotypes of the "buffoon" or the "spokesman of reaction" suggest. Finally Spiro Agnew impresses the interviewer as "a serious man" in the sense in which Gen. Charles de Gaulle used the phrase. He is a serious man partly because he epitomizes a mood, an attitude, that a great many Americans share. If he became President before 1976 he might be a most difficult President to defeat. That is one reason why he still seems unlikely to become President before 1976.