

James Reston

At Least Agnew Isn't a Fraud

Washington

VICE PRESIDENT Agnew is in trouble again — this time for differing with President Nixon on China — and people keep asking how he manages to do it. The explanation is really fairly simple: He's an amiable man who says about what he thinks.

It is easy to differ with his opinions and often with his judgments, but unlike the humorless calculators in Washington, he is at least faithful to both his principles and his prejudices.

The Capitol and even the cabinet are well-populated these days with influential men who say one thing in private and something quite different in public. But not Agnew.

He didn't like the way the reporters and commentators behaved last year and said so. He still doesn't like our behavior, but while many of his colleagues have stopped hounding the scribblers for tactical reasons, he keeps on scolding them at every opportunity.

THERE IS nothing personal about this either. He will drink with the reporters and condemn them at the same time, but the one thing he won't do is change his tune just to fit the Republican party line.

Thus, when his opinion was sought by Nixon in the National Security Council the other day about playing diplomatic ping pong with Communist China, he said he was against it. He thought it would be a cheap propaganda victory for Peking and said so. Similarly, when he had a few reporters into his room at Williamsburg, Va., for a nightcap at the Republican Governors Conference, and was asked the same question, he gave the same answer.

This helps explain why, unlike Nixon, the Vice President has inherited the affection and loyalty the Republican conservatives used to give to Barry Goldwater. Even the reporters like him personally, despite his attacks on the press, because he does not pretend.



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The result is that he is a flypaper for trouble. He is likely to have more and more trouble with the White House because he has the courage of Nixon's prejudices. He thinks the Chinese Communists are a menace and he's not about to change his opinion for a couple of ping pong games and a few tentative smiles.

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NOR IS IT LIKELY to bother him too much if in the process his opinions and plain talk cost him the vice presidential nomination next year. He is quite frank in saying that the President should pick the running-mate who strengthens the ticket, and if that is not Agnew, he will campaign for whatever ticket comes out of the convention if he's wanted, or just disappear quietly if that is the President's pleasure.

It is harder to define his political philosophy than to understand why people of different political persuasions like him personally. No doubt he thinks of himself as a classic Republican conservative, rather like Goldwater, but he's nothing of the sort.

A short while ago I listened to him talk privately for over an hour about the problems of the country.

His first theme was old-fashioned Tory gospel. People, he said, had forgotten the obligations of charity. Well-heeled people in this country weren't giving more than 10 per cent of what they could to the poor, while the poor were accepting handouts from the State without the slightest feeling of gratitude. He deplored both attitudes, and recalled the weekends in Baltimore when he and his friends used to go out to the Glenn Martin Airplane factory and pull nails out of used lumber, so that it could be given to the poor.

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BUT WHEN I asked him if he despaired of the Nation's capacity to absorb 25 million new people every 10 years, and solve the urban and economic problems of the Nation, he said he did not.

"What we need," he said, "is total environmental planning." Piecemeal planning such as the liberal economists propose was not good enough for him. It was inefficient, he said, to have partial and separate planning for education, urban renewal, and all the rest. We had to plan all these things together over much wider areas of the Nation.

So it would probably be wrong to say that Agnew has worked out a coherent political philosophy. He merely has strong views, sometimes about contradictory things, and is therefore vulnerable to error and attack.

But at least he is not a fraud. He does what comes naturally, and in the calculating capital, that is both a relief and a problem.

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