

APR 17 1972

Dirty Laundry on a Limp Line

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

White Knight. The Rise of Spiro Agnew. By Jules Witcover. 465 pages. Random House. \$10.

The first half of Jules Witcover's "White Knight: The Rise of Spiro Agnew" traces the incumbent Vice President's career from its earliest beginnings up to its turning point in 1968, when the then Governor of Maryland was lifted from relative obscurity into the national spotlight as Republican Presidential nominee Richard Nixon's running mate. Here it is shown that Mr. Agnew was not simply picked as a border-state Governor with conservative leanings in order to implement the so-called Southern strategy; but that a far more complex political chemistry was at work. The second half of "White Knight" traces in detail Mr. Agnew's controversial career as Vice President, and arrives at the conclusion that the office he has held for the last four years is a problematical one and could perhaps do with some Constitutional overhauling.

Does this make "White Knight" sound like a humdrum civics lesson with a weak-kneed conclusion? Perhaps it does, but anyone who has read Mr. Witcover's previous books will suspect that such a description must be misleading. For as he demonstrated in "85 Days: The Last Campaign of Robert Kennedy" and "The Resurrection of Richard Nixon," Mr. Witcover is a savvy political reporter blessed with both an instinct for the jugular and a gift for knitting together a compelling narrative from a complex tangle of details. And in fact "White Knight" is more interesting for the history it recounts than for the lessons it tries to teach. And it is most interesting of all for the new perspectives it brings to Vice President Agnew's extraordinary political career.

Refreshing Naivete

It will not do to consider the Vice President a "buffoon," Mr. Witcover makes clear. Mr. Agnew may have seemed one during the 1968 Presidential campaign, but in order to properly understand the famous verbal gaffs one has to take into consideration Mr. Agnew's almost refreshing naivete, his pride, his suspicion of the press, and his peculiar locker-room sense of humor, all of which combined to create a misleading impression of the man. Nor, on the other hand, is he simply the political hatchet man that seemed to emerge after the election. Almost every shred of evi-

dence that Mr. Witcover can turn up seems to indicate that when Agnew set out to slay his opponents with his own jawbone, he was acting out of his own convictions.

Nor were those convictions only recently arrived at. Mr. Witcover makes a strong case that the famous "overnight shift" in Mr. Agnew's politics from liberalism to conservatism was simply an illusion created mainly by the extremism of George P. Mahoney, Mr. Agnew's opponent in the 1966 Maryland gubernatorial election. In actual fact, Mr. Agnew was always a law-and-order man stubbornly opposed to extra-legal dissent.

Mr. Witcover is not an admirer of Mr. Agnew's. But the negative portrait he paints has unusual variety and hue. He goes far beyond the familiar liberal bombast and builds his case out of the details of Agnew's career and character: the nit-picking legal constructionism that characterized his handling of Maryland's civil-rights movement; his inconsistencies on the profounder levels of political principle; his refusal ever to admit being in the wrong.

Accumulation of Offenses

Instead of swinging machetes, Mr. Witcover snipes away with B.B.'s. We are never simply outraged; our stomachs are turned slowly by an accumulation of small offenses, one of the most provocative of which to this reviewer is the report of an exchange between Mr. Agnew and a group of reporters during the 1968 election campaign. During a discussion of Mr. Agnew's opposition to Eldridge Cleaver, the Vice Presidential candidate was asked if he had read "Soul on Ice." "I'll never read it," Mr. Agnew snapped. Didn't he make any exceptions for talent? "No, he's a criminal," Mr. Agnew said. Well, what about Oscar Wilde? someone inquired. "What did he do?" Mr. Agnew asked. A reporter said Wilde was a homosexual. "Oh, say, fella," was Mr. Agnew's response.

Yet for all the variety and color and painstaking documentation of Mr. Witcover's study, something is lacking in its ultimate coherence. Mr. Witcover never seems to step outside of his material to formulate conclusions appropriate to the details. His two-part structure makes superficial sense, but in the last analysis it seems to sag. He has hung Mr. Agnew's dirty laundry on the limp lines of argument that politics is a complicated game and that the office of the Vice Presidency may be a historical anachronism, and they don't really support his case. I can strongly recommend "White Knight" to anyone inclined to disapprove of Mr. Agnew, and I can warn his supporters to stay away. But I don't think Mr. Witcover has written a book profound enough to change anyone's mind about the current state of the political scene.



Jules Witcover