

The Vice President

Spiro Theodore Agnew

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By JAMES T. WOOTEN NOV 9 1972

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 7 — The question was a constant companion to his campaign, and in Los Angeles last week it was raised once again. The reporter wanted to know which of the much-discussed public images—the old one or the new one—more closely resembled the real Vice President of the United States. “Well, it depends,” he responded, smiling slightly. “When I get up and look in the mirror in the morning, I say ‘What are you going to be today, fellow?’ If I feel bad, I’m the old Agnew. If I feel good, I’m the new Agnew.”

The answer prompted the laughter it sought, but it also struck some who heard it as representing about as much self-disclosure as Spiro Theodore Agnew would ever allow himself to make.

In the short span of a decade he has risen from obscurity to re-election Tuesday to a second term in the country's second-highest elective office. During those years he has been many things to many people, a veritable Lon Chaney of American politics.

Yet, during those same years, his identity has been clouded by the many roles he has played and now, the questions about him seem even more important as speculation about his chances for the Presidency increase with each passing day.

Pragmatic Flexibility

There are some who believe him to be a man of such pragmatic flexibility as to defy any singular description, either by himself or by any of the Americans he has come to fascinate during his climb.

There are others, on the other hand, who find the 53-year-old son of a Greek immigrant (he will be 54 on Thursday) to be as easily read as the letters at the top of the eye chart.

Whatever may be the case, the basic facts of his public life are now fairly well known. He is a native of Baltimore and a lawyer, a veteran, an Episcopalian, married and has four children and a granddaughter, and is a man who likes the piano, pro football, televised sports, tennis, golf, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and James Michener.

He does not smoke, drinks

sparingly, is impeccably dressed, beginning to grow bald, and enjoys frozen chocolate miniatures.

Politically, however, the trail is tougher to follow.

He was elected chief executive of Baltimore County, Md., in 1962 because he convinced the Democratic voters that his version of Republicanism was more compatible with their views than the man of their own party.

Knight in Liberal Armor

He became Governor of Maryland in 1966 because he stood as a knight in liberal armor in contrast to a starched conservative Democrat running a racially tinted campaign.

In 1968, however, history moved him to the role of hard-nosed disciplinarian and even though he touted other men for the Republican Presidential nomination at first, Richard Nixon plucked him out of a crowd to be his running mate and to take on the national party's law and order mantle.

Mr. Agnew wore it like a glove, and when the Republican strategists decided in 1970 to extend George C. Wallace's attack on the news media, he accepted the assignment and carried it off with what they believed to be grace and style.

But this year, as he and the President prepared for a re-election campaign, Mr. Agnew

announced that whatever images he had fostered in the past he planned in 1972 to present another one. He had not enjoyed being the “cutting edge” of the 1970 contest. This year, he promised he would be different, and he was.

Still, the other Mr. Agnew was also there this year. He harshly demanded a public stigma for draft evaders and military deserters. He called hecklers brown shirts and the spiritual progeny of Nazis.

But it was, after all, the President's campaign, not his own. Regardless of his popularity, Mr. Agnew could not lead the ticket. He was a surrogate and a candidate, but a surrogate first — and now after four years and three elections, there were still many Americans left today who wondered along with the reporter in Los Angeles which of his images was close to the real Mr. Agnew.

Mr. Agnew recognizes that at this point in history he stands the best chance of any Republican of being his party's Presidential nominee in 1976. He realizes also that if he chooses to walk down that road, the public's demands for self-disclosure will intensify with each step.

So the question now and in the next four years will be the same: not whether Mr. Agnew is a household word—he is that, in spades, but what precisely is the meaning of that word.