

George Will

The Latest Performance Of Mr. Agnew

About two months ago, when it first became clear that Watergate might reduce the Nixon administration to rubble, Vice President Spiro Agnew was in an enviable position. John Connally, Mr. Agnew's most formidable rival for the 1976 GOP nomination, was waist deep in the President's praise and sinking fast. Mr. Connally, not Mr. Agnew, was the appointed of Nero. And no one could accuse Mr. Agnew of culpable intimacy with anyone of consequence in the White House.

But then Mr. Agnew began to turn the fall of his enemies—the senior White House staff—into an occasion for still more self-inflicted injuries.

It is sad. This should have been an opportunity for him to demonstrate to an understandably skeptical public that his well-known pugnacity represents stolid integrity rather than mere partisanship. Instead, Watergate has been just an excuse for Mr. Agnew to journey to Charlottesville, Va., to tick off journalists for their inadequacies.

The country is in desperate need of evidence that *someone* in the administration is capable of real indignation about the sustained criminality that the President likes to call a "deplorable incident." But Mr. Agnew, whose reservoirs of indignation have not previously seemed finite, has responded to Watergate by—surprise!—conducting seminars on the press.

Until now, Mr. Agnew's performance as Vice President, while fascinating, has not really been important to the nation. But as Mr. Nixon shuffles somnambulistically toward the collapse of his administration, Mr. Agnew's performance becomes significant.

It is especially significant that Mr. Agnew has made more of the vice presidency than any predecessor has managed to do, and now he is trapped in a paradox. His peculiar "success" with his peculiar office has made him even less plausible as a potential president than he was in 1968.

Of the 537 people who are in Washington because the voters sent them, 536 make speeches and also govern, at least a little bit. Vice presidents make speeches. Period.

A vice president who enjoyed a close relationship with the president might be a man of consequence in Washington. But when was the last time we had such a vice president? Certainly Mr. Agnew has not been one.

Mr. Nixon's relations with Mr. Agnew have been like Mr. Nixon's relations with Capitol Hill and the Cabinet. That is, Mr. Agnew's dealings with the President have been filtered through those infamous layers of aides to whom the President entrusted the task of dealing with all people who are not heads of foreign governments, Texas Democrats or George Allen.

The vice presidency is a constitutional vacuum, devoid of serious governmental functions. But political nature abhors a vacuum, so presidents (and, in this administration, President's minions) dream up things for the vice president to do. Often he is assigned chores that are politically useful, but distinctly non-presidential. Certainly Mr. Agnew spent a lot of time doing things *because* they are not the sort of thing presidents do, like brawling with the press.

In more than four years of talk—and nothing but talk—Mr. Agnew has demonstrated that the vice presidency, too, can be a "bully pulpit." And some of Mr. Agnew's words have no doubt had consequences. But speechifying is not government, and Mr. Agnew's speechifying has damaged his stature as a plausible president.

It is likely that many Americans agree with the 25-year-old welder whose qualified admiration for Mr. Agnew is recorded in Robert Cole's book "The Middle Americans": "You know, I hate snobs, but you've got to be honest and ask if that guy has what it takes in the head to be president. I don't want a guy there just because he sounds like me shouting my head off over my lunch box."

Mr. Agnew, like the welder, speaks a good bit of truth. But that is not the point. Too often Mr. Agnew sounds like Johnny-One-Note. And there are some truths—even important truths—that should not be advocated constantly and abrasively by men who hope to unite and lead the nation. Presidents can not be divisive men specializing in the rhetoric of "positive polarization."

Of course, many in Mr. Agnew's constituency disagree. To them Mr. Agnew is a symbol, a clenched fist of defiance wagging under the upturned noses of all those elitists who look down their noses at people who look up to Mr. Agnew. But if Mr. Nixon should leave office prematurely, the country will need a president, not a symbol. Unfortunately Mr. Agnew, who is a crackerjack cultural critic, has not manifested much interest in government.

I think I know pretty well where he stands on corporal punishment and advocacy journalism (and, for that matter, on corporal punishment for advocacy journalists). But I haven't a glimmer of an idea what, if anything, Mr. Agnew thinks about monetary theory or the doctrine of finite deterrence.

With Mr. Nixon's presidency stumbling toward collapse, the unknowns about Mr. Agnew are alarming. They probably would be even more alarming if Mr. Nixon were not so well known.