

Agnew's Speech: Three in One

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 14—With Americans flying to the moon and parading in sober protest past the White House, this is hardly the weekend here for reasoned discussion of major public issues. Yet the challenge flung last night at the television networks and others by Vice President Agnew has

suddenly filled this capital's agenda

News with a list of im-

Analysis portant questions

that will either stimulate long debate or provoke yet another emotional row across the land. Which it will be is not yet clear.

Mr. Agnew did not speak in the spirit of President Nixon's inaugural plea for a lowering of voices. But he and many other Administration officials believe that well-amplified critics were taking advantage of the President's moderation and that the time has come to fight back.

The White House certainly seems pleased with the political impact of Mr. Agnew's tough talking in recent weeks, and it leaves the impression that the themes he has struck will be further developed by the President's aides in the months ahead.

The Vice President's newest themes ranged far beyond his announced subject of television news. They dealt, also, with the practical and philosophic problems of private broadcasting on the public airways. They dealt with a democracy's inability to project unity in the middle of a war. And they dealt, almost casually, with the diplomacy surrounding that war.

In effect, therefore, Mr. Agnew delivered three speeches wrapped into one, and the questions he raised can be grouped accordingly:

The first and dominant theme of Mr. Agnew's speech was that their airways belong to all the people and that a "small and unelected elite" of television producers and commentators had to be somehow stripped of their great power to shape public opinion.

Not a New Complaint
They have no right to claim the First Amendment's freedom of the press guarantee as newspapers do, he said, and should be compelled by their listeners — though not by the Government — to "represent the views of America."

This is not a new complaint. Politicians back to George Washington have been irked by the filtration of their views through the press and by its distortion of reality as they perceive it.

Because it offered them the chance to address the people directly, television was at first seen by the politicians as a welcome antidote to the press. ("I can only say thank God for television and radio for keeping the newspapers a little more honest," Richard Nixon said seven years ago.)

But the new medium's enormous reach, its graphic concern with controversy and violence, its special reward for style and good looks, and, recently, its attempts to balance its pictures with interpretive commentary have evoked troubled thoughts in many quarters.

All Presidents of the television era have felt its power. John F. Kennedy knew that on balance the medium helped him politically. Lyndon B. Johnson felt cheated by it, and devoted a valedictory speech — the

morning after he announced his retirement on March 31, 1968 — to a plea that the industry guard the screen "against the works of divisiveness and bigotry, against the corrupting evils of partisanship in any guise."

But Mr. Agnew went far beyond appeals for care and restraint. He complained of specific television programs and comments, called for a campaign of public pressure against a "closed fraternity of privileged men" in the television centers of New York and Washington, and pointedly reminded them that the privilege of broadcasting required Government sanction and license.

Even though the Vice President rejected Government supervision as a solution and even though the television networks vowed to resist all pressure, both sides knew that a locally organized campaign of complaint against the local stations that hold the licenses could indeed force program changes.

Questions Raised

Do the Administration and Dean Burch, the new chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, wish to use the licensing power for indirect influence over television news and commentary?

What would this portend for public television, which is trying to build a new network with public funds?

What of entertainment programs and, indeed, what of the commercial profits of television if the country follows the brutal logic of the premise that the airways belong to all the people?

No thoughtful reporter, editor or television producer who has ever tried to define what is and what is not fit to print or broadcast has ever pretended that fixed and satisfactory answers are available. But who "elects" industrialists, bankers, teachers and thousands of other powerful influences on a society?

The sociology of power forms a vast and uncertain science, and those who feel offended by power inevitably challenge the credentials of those who wield it. Until recently, some of the loudest complaints about television came not from the Republican Administration but from the poor and the blacks who felt ignored or shut out.

Mr. Agnew has now popularized some of these crucial questions, but they will surely not be solved by opinion polls or political exhortation. And the discussion is certain to be especially difficult if it comes in the contest of momentary political complaint.

For a second part of the Vice President's speech was simply an aggressive assertion of the Administration's growing resentment over the role that the press and television play in conveying dissent on Vietnam and other issues.

There is an even larger body of precedent for this attitude among occupants and candidates for the White House. President Kennedy called in the editors and urged them to create the machinery of voluntary censorship in 1961, after the Bay of Pigs invasion, because he felt that the Communists were profiting from the openness of American journalism. But he was concerned about news of military value and explicitly said that he welcomed controversy and criticism in all other respects.

The Nixon Administration resentment seem to run deeper still. It begins with the theory that dissent on the war helps the enemy, because he hopes for a domestic collapse, and it blames the "East Coast liberals" for encouraging and even magnifying that dissent.

Conservatives around the President have tried to persuade him that he can do no right in the eyes of the liberals and ought to stake his political future on the "silent majority" across the country. Liberals around the President are bitter because they think their allies in the Northeast have been so niggardly with praise for Mr. Nixon that they are driving him to the right.

Romney's Theory

Either way, prominent Republicans are coming to the theory that George Romney expressed today, that all media of journalism are "dominated by the thought centers of New York and Washington and by thought critics there who are of the New Culture."

President Johnson felt the same alienation, but attributed it to Eastern resentment of a Texan. George C. Wallace demonstrated that the cry against the Eastern press can be extremely popular before many audiences.

Behind this complaint, too, lie important questions about the influence of Eastern thought on the nation's communications system. But Mr. Agnew seemed to be arguing that all the power and influence and television time available to the White House are ineffective against this hidden conspiracy.

He seemed to be saying that not just Eastern commentators but no commentators at all had a right to analyze the fully transmitted words of a President — unless the analysis was positive.

In recent years, this issue has usually evoked the opposite complaint — and especially from Republicans — namely, that the Presidency has grown too powerful for the national good.

To reinforce his argument and to discredit some of his critics, Mr. Agnew devoted a third segment of his speech to a formidable but undocumented accusation. He charged that the Johnson Administration and its chief negotiator in Paris, W. Averell Harriman, had "hwhapped some of the greatest military concessions in the history of warfare for an enemy agreement on the shape of the bargaining table."

Apparently, Mr. Agnew was alluding to the halt in the bombing of North Vietnam, which Mr. Nixon approved and, in any case, has not countermanded. Apparently, too, the Vice President does not share the view of Mr. Nixon and Henry A. Kissinger, his National Security Adviser, that it was the Democrats who were looking only for military victory in Vietnam and that only the new Administration has offered the enemy negotiators any meaningful "concessions."

Whatever he meant, Mr. Agnew's discussions of Vietnam diplomacy cried out for the kind of analysis and further inquiry that he found so offensive when reporters applied it to the President's address to the nation last week.

He thus added yet another complication to issues that, even when considered in pastoral isolation, are complex indeed.

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