

The Agnew Probe and '76

Vice President Agnew's full dress press conference yesterday, though not the brass knuckles counter-attack some advisers wanted, came after they had convinced him that his original plan to remain silent was political folly.

One longtime ally told Agnew in no uncertain terms that merely expressing confidence that "my innocence will be affirmed" in the federal investigation of corruption in Maryland would hurt him irreparably for 1976. While not accepting the advice that he frontally assault alleged political "enemies," the Vice President did deliver a categorical denial as he had been pressed to do. But, as his supporters well know, that may not be enough.

Whether he is finally found innocent or guilty, Agnew's political purity may have been permanently tarnished, transforming present facts of national political power. What's more, there are shrouded signs from the White House that this transformation may not entirely displease Richard Nixon.

Agnew himself has discussed within the bosom of his official family possible political repercussions of the formal Justice Department notification that he is under investigation. His own conclusion: Even if he is found innocent as he predicts, the political impact could be severe.

The saving grace, as Agnew sees it, is that the 1976 campaign is still far off. But such hopeful sentiment may be whistling in the graveyard.

For example, though under extreme pressure from White House reporters at his regular press briefing Tuesday,

White House press aide Gerald Warren refused to say whether President Nixon was defending his Vice President. Later, Warren quietly passed word to Agnew's office that the Vice President should draw no conclusions from this.

Even if Agnew were thick-skinned enough to draw no conclusions, other politicians are not. The President's failure to come through (as we write this) with a ringing defense of the man who has issued so many ringing defenses for him has only one political meaning: Mr. Nixon, doubled over with Watergate and other problems, will not risk the taint of backing a man, even his own Vice President, who may be indicted and convicted of a federal crime. Warren's somewhat grudging, less enthusiastic support of Agnew yesterday could scarcely cheer the Vice President.

Indeed, ardent Agnewites report confidentially that at least some Nixon aides see the Agnew crisis as by no means an unmitigated evil. Sensational charges against Agnew have taken over most front pages, the first political event in weeks to compete with Watergate.

These same Agnew allies, moreover, suspect that Agnew's earlier decision not to come out fighting against the charges may have been strongly influenced by Mr. Nixon. In truth, Agnew's confident and decisive appearance over national television yesterday contrasted sharply with Mr. Nixon's month-after-month delay to make an all-out defense against charges of a presidential Watergate cover-up. The decision for the sudden press confer-

ence was definitely not dictated by the Oval Office but was Agnew's own after being pressed hard by frantic advisers.

In sum, this latest scandal will probably transform Republican politics from top to bottom, with ramifications not dimly perceptible today. Agnew has been the single strongest 1976 Republican presidential prospect, in combined terms of his own party and as an opponent of the Democrats in the presidential election.

Our own interviews recently in Jersey City found that voters had completely disassociated Agnew from any Watergate taint. While Mr. Nixon's trust index had sharply declined since the election, Agnew's had increased by a phenomenal 14 percentage points. Moreover, Agnew beat Sen. Edward M. Kennedy in a head-to-head pairing by a larger margin than any other Republican.

Hence, the result of any serious undermining of Agnew's 1976 standing would be enormous, with two Republican conservatives—Gov. Ronald Reagan of California and former Gov. John B. Connally of Texas—likely to share in his legacy.

Of course, Agnew may never be indicted. Or, if indicted, he may be found innocent in a trial which could end with a massive outpouring of Agnew sympathy.

But even if that should eventually happen, the most loyal Agnewites fear today that Agnew's image as the immaculately uncorruptible leader towering above the Watergate White House has been damaged, perhaps beyond repair.