

A Contrast With Nixon

Agnew at News Parley Seems Blunter And More Direct Than the President

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 8—Vice President Agnew has always been a blunter, more direct man—at least in public—than his boss, President Nixon. The contrast was never more evident than in his decision to hold a news conference today on the investigation of his affairs being conducted in Baltimore and in the way he handled himself at the conference. Mr. Nixon has consistently shrunk from public discussion of the Watergate case. He has held no news conference since March 15—a period of almost five months—despite almost daily requests from White House correspondents.

His brief oral statements about the case during that time have been either cryptic or deprecatory. Many believe that his written statements have disclosed very little and raised more questions than they answered. And his spokesmen have avoided answering nearly all questions about Watergate at daily briefings.

Only the briefing given by Mr. Nixon's counsel, Prof. Charles Alan Wright, on the legal situation surrounding the tape recordings of Presidential conversations broke from this pattern.

Public Suspicion Cited

The result has been mounting public suspicion, as suggested by the Gallup Poll, the questions asked at the Senate Watergate hearings and even criticism by Republicans and friendly newspapers.

Mr. Nixon's intimates have explained his conduct by saying that Mr. Nixon seldom knew where the accusations were coming from. In addition, they have said, his legal and constitutional problems are complex. Outsiders have traced the President's reluctance to speak to an inbred distrust of the media.

The Vice President is similarly situated, and he has shown himself to have serious misgivings about the media. But he decided, within 48 hours of the first news of his troubles, that he had no intention, in his phrase, of standing by while he was "skewered" by unnamed "sources close to the investigation."

Having made that decision, he replied to most questions unambiguously. Had he considered resigning? "I have not." Had he ever had a political slush fund? "Never." Had he ever received money for personal use from persons dealing with the State of Maryland? "Absolutely not." And so it went.

Mr. Agnew demonstrated as well that he knows the importance to journalists of symbolic questions. When he was asked whether he would make public the letter in which he had been informed that he was under investigation—a question that he had apparently not anticipated—he replied, "Why not?"

Weighs Lawyer's Advice

And when he was asked a question about the widespread practice of contractor's contributing to the campaigns of high-ranking state officials who control the awarding of contracts, the Vice President did not bob and weave. Speaking to a roomful of reporters who knew the practice well, he said that he would seem "naive" if he pretended that the practice did not exist in Maryland.

On one issue—the constitutional strictures that may prevent him from furnishing personal financial documents or

testifying to a grand jury—Mr. Agnew was noncommittal. He is no constitutional scholar, he said, and he would weigh his lawyers' advice before committing himself to a position.

In that, too, Mr. Agnew differed from Mr. Nixon. When questions such as executive privilege and immunity began to come up early this year, the President initially claimed maximum protection, then gradually pulled back from those claims as the legal situation evolved.

To reporters at the news conference or watching on television, Mr. Agnew seemed in complete control of the situation—relaxed after a bit of initial nervousness, direct, unpretentious and self-confident.

It appeared that, in the short term, the performance would benefit him substantially—certainly far more than silence could have. But the longer-term picture is unclear.

A Difficult Task

If he is convicted, of course, Mr. Agnew's political career will be ended. If he is indicted and then cleared, most politicians believe, it will be almost impossible for him to run for President. If he is exonerated by the investigation and not indicted, he will still face the difficult task of convincing politicians and the public that despite the smoke there was no fire.



Associated Press

Gerald L. Warren, Presidential press aide, says it would be unsuitable for White House to comment on Maryland inquiry.

One politician whose role in selecting the 1976 Republican Presidential nominee will presumably be substantial is Mr. Nixon. Some supporters have urged Mr. Agnew to go it alone, to dissociate himself subtly from the President because of Watergate. Others have counseled against this in the belief that Mr. Nixon, no matter how battered he may be three years from now, will still constitute a valuable ally.

The Vice President did neither today. He restated his confidence in Mr. Nixon and said that Mr. Nixon had told him personally that the confidence was returned. But he also said that he thought he had to stand on his own feet in his moment of trial and had no intention of shopping around for backers.

Clearly, Mr. Agnew believes that he can ride out the present storm. Equally clearly, he believes that his ability to do so will depend on his own resources and not those of the White House. He obviously did not find in its reaction to trouble a pattern that he thought would serve his own cause.