

The Agnew Press Conference

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Aug. 9—What this town has been hoping for recently is somebody, anybody in power, who would stand up and give plain answers to hard questions, and Vice President Agnew has finally done it.

When the Justice Department informed him officially that he was being "investigated" for using his influence and taking bribes on government contracts, he didn't duck for long behind legal barriers, but called a press conference and said it was a "damned lie."

He didn't hide for weeks or months behind "executive privilege" or issue proclamations about his "legal rights." After a short but unfortunate delay, he saw the reality: The headlines in the newspapers made him look like a crook, so he came out fighting.

The courts will decide later whether there was any wrongdoing in this case. The only point here now is how a public official should react when there is even a suspicion of wrong-doing, and Mr. Agnew demonstrated how to do it.

He didn't ask but told the President he was going to call a press conference at 3 o'clock the next afternoon. He didn't have a few "friends" in the press around to hear his story, but invited everybody, TV cameras and all. He asked for the tough questions, and he got them.

Had he ever taken any money from government contractors? No! Was there a problem about politicians and government contractors? Sure he said, you would be "naive" if you didn't recognize it. Had he ever been offered a bribe to use his influence in public office? Yes, once when he was too inexperienced to know what was happening, but it had nothing to do with this case. Had he thought of resigning or standing down while these charges were going through the courts? Certainly not, he didn't believe he would be indicted.

He was cautious about committing himself to appear before a grand jury

or about handing over personal papers to the courts, not for personal reasons, but because this obviously raised constitutional questions that also touch on President Nixon's problems in the Watergate case. But he insisted that he had nothing to hide, would make all relevant documents available at the appropriate time, and, while listening to legal counsel, would decide on his own what to do.

"I think the Vice President of the United States should stand on his own feet," he said. "It really isn't that important what a President says, although I welcome the President's support. . . . He has given me it, unequivocally. . . . So I'm not spending my time looking around to see who's supporting me. I'm defending myself."

The contrast with President Nixon, who hasn't had a press conference during the Watergate crisis since last March 15, was unavoidable. So maybe something important is happening here, probably as a result of Watergate.

Even at the top of the Nixon Administration, officials are beginning to speak out. The new Attorney General Elliot Richardson, didn't ask whether the Agnew "investigation" would embarrass the President or the Vice President, but simply advised Mr. Agnew that he was being investigated for possible criminal action. Also, Mr. Richardson has instructed his colleagues in the Justice Department to keep a careful record of anybody, including members of Congress, who try to influence decisions in the Department of Justice.

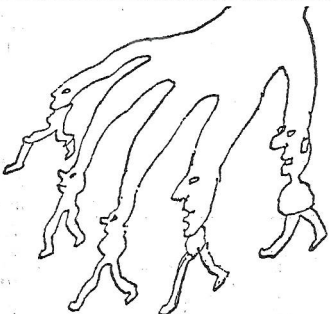
This new reporting system, designed to remove the Justice Department from politics, will "discourage approaches" by persons with improper motives, Mr. Richardson said, and it is interesting that he added that "only news media representatives are excluded" from this new reporting system.

This is a change worth noting. It is not only the Ervin committee and other members of Congress who are beginning to show a new independence, but that key members of the President's own executive family are beginning to act on what they believe to be their own official responsibilities, even if this embarrasses the White House.

Vice President Agnew's press conference is only one important symbol of this change. He has been a loyal member of the "Nixon team," and he went out of his way in his press conference to express again his conviction of the President's innocence in the Watergate disaster, but at the same time, he insisted on protecting his own integrity by facing the charges against him in public.

And the reaction to this was startling. For even without knowing the facts in Agnew's case, the feeling after his press conference was very much in his favor—in fact, that finally in this town somebody in power had talked up with candor and passion, and taken the risk of telling the truth.

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Douglas Florian