

# A Nixon-vs.-Agnew Scenario

The inability of President Nixon and the Justice Department to find a clean way out of the dirty in-fighting now swirling about Vice President Spiro Agnew is raising a serious, new challenge to Mr. Nixon's vaunted political judgment, so badly scarred in the Watergate scandals.

Worse yet, the seeming lack of any viable political policy inside the White House to deal with the swelling Agnew problem threatens a schism that may well harden anti-Nixon sentiment within the party's pro-Agnew right-wing.

This is true despite Mr. Nixon's appeal late yesterday that the public give Agnew "decent consideration and presumption of innocence," an appeal that had a mocking echo from an apparent repeated administration efforts the past few weeks to force him out.

As one Republican state chairman told us: "It looks like the President is not doing right by Agnew. He should stand up beside him publicly, or call for his resignation, but not try to shoot him down in a White House ambush."

Fairly or not, Republican politicians of all ideological persuasion are now leveling quiet but forceful criticism not at Agnew but at Richard M. Nixon for what one described as "a badly botched job of politics."

The botch: with the White House perceived as having decided, however reluctantly, that Agnew must go and with most Republicans convinced that the White House itself has been secretly and unscrupulously promoting that theme, Agnew is suddenly re-

vealed as having no intention to quit.

"They thought they could 'Pat Gray him' right out of there," one shrewd Midwest Republican pro complains. "They should have known that Agnew is not Pat Gray." The nomination of L. Patrick Gray to succeed J. Edgar Hoover as head of the FBI was withdrawn by Mr. Nixon at Gray's own request after he got caught in the coils of Watergate.

With the Vice President, events are operating on a different wave length, at least for the present. Having rejected all pressures to quit, Agnew is now found by a Newsweek poll, taken by Dr. George Gallup, to be the beneficiary of a huge 66 per cent of the public who think he should not resign.

More important, only 40 per cent credit the President with acting "fairly" toward his Vice President.

That pro-Agnew sentiment is raising questions among some Republican leaders as to whether the Vice President now may try to exploit his political strength at the President's expense. Agnew has been on the receiving end of phone calls, letters and personal contacts with many such followers who are trying to make him speak out far more forcefully in his own behalf.

But Agnew is moving with great caution. Agnew intimates say he worries that any effort by him to rally party and public support could have one dangerous result: forcing voters to choose between him and Mr. Nixon.

"That's the last thing we want as of today," one such Agnew supporter told us. "If we do that, both of us will lose in the end."

But in the face of what the Agnew camp—together with most of political Washington—believes to be a hard-nosed, White House-based, anti-Agnew operation, with his resignation as the objective, Agnew's uncustomary restraint may not last much longer. He speaks in California late this week to a frankly partisan audience of Republican women in Los Angeles. He may unlimber some of the hot Agnew rhetoric then, but his most ardent backers aren't sure.

Moreover, the formation of an Agnew "defense fund," announced late last week, could offer him a national vehicle to demonstrate public support. Yet, Agnew's aides are curiously loath—as of today—to exploit the defense fund.

For President Nixon, the worsening Agnew problem poses only hard questions. Top White House aides insist, publicly and privately, that the White House has had absolutely nothing to do with the attempted ambush of the Vice President and the continuing leaks of kickback horror stories. Some highly placed Republicans agree.

But with the White House Watergate denials still fresh, these White House denials of any share in the Agnew ambush are simply not believed, particularly not by Republican politicians so deeply embittered by Watergate.

Thus, one legacy of Watergate is to feed the suspicion that Mr. Nixon and the White House really are laying the plot for the Agnew ambush, further impairing the President's moral authority to deal with his latest crisis.