



The Sad Spectacle Of Spiro Agnew

— Joseph Kraft

THERE is reason to feel sorry for Spiro Agnew in his present plight. Not that the Vice President has been unfairly done in by the Justice Department, as he and his supporters seem pleased to believe. The true sadness lies in the circumstance which finds the Vice President of the United States totally unfitted to meet the troubles which beset him.

Two incidents demonstrate the Vice President's incapacity for dealing effectively with his present affairs. One is the bold claim that he will not resign even if indicted by the grand jury in Baltimore. Nobody aware of the realities of life in Washington could advance that claim.

If Agnew is indicted, the President would be obliged by solemn public commitments to force him out. At a minimum, Mr. Nixon would cut off all the Vice President's delegated functions. There would be no missions abroad, no service on boards and commissions, no office in the White House complex.

★ ★ ★

THE Vice President could, of course, go up to Capitol Hill to fulfill his constitutional duty of presiding over the Senate. But Agnew has few friends in the Senate. The hard-ball players there are already rubbing their hands over the fun they would have at Agnew's expense if he came back. It would be the kind of punishment nobody could withstand — least of all a man as personally sensitive as the Vice President.

A second revealing incident was the Vice President's request last week that the House of Representatives move in to consider his case before it went to the grand jury. The request was made in ex-

treme haste, without any preparation of speaker Carl Albert or other Democratic leaders.

But anybody who knows anything about Washington knows one thing. It is that getting congressional approval for a controversial matter requires the most laborious preparation of key figures behind the scenes.

Without such careful laying of the ground, the Congress merely follows its natural instinct. The natural instinct is to duck hard cases.

The reason why the Vice President is so ill-equipped for his present difficulties is not very doubtful. Most men in American politics move up gradually from office to office. They acquire knowledge and experience. They come to know instinctively what is possible and not possible in a given circumstance.

★ ★ ★

BUT THE RISE of the Vice President has been by mere fluke. He was handpicked by Mr. Nixon to be Vice President. Before that he had served only two years as governor of the small state of Maryland. He was elected largely thanks to a crazy Democratic primary.

Before becoming governor, Agnew was for four years chief executive of Baltimore County. But he owed that post also to a freak division in the Democratic Party. Thus the Vice President did not face the crises and problems usual to American politicians.

It is a sad spectacle. Perhaps the saddest aspect of it is that Agnew is not alone. Like John Mitchell and John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman, he is a man not much better or worse than most. Like them, he is in way over his head.