

The Nixon-Agnew Conflict

The intensity of anti-Nixon feeling now beating in the collective breast of many backers of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew can best be gauged by the fact that his brass-knuckle attack on Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen was really aimed at Richard M. Nixon.

"Agnew," one informed Republican says, "wasn't hunting such small game as Petersen. Petersen was simply his stand-in for Nixon."

Evidence in support of that contention is considerable, but one fact, unpublished until now, stands above all others: Agnew had vainly made a private but extremely vigorous appeal to President Nixon himself precisely along the lines of his later public attack on Petersen before the Republican women in Los Angeles Sept. 29.

But the President flatly rejected the Vice President's private appeal in dealing with highly disabling leaks that Agnew said were coming from Petersen and his aides. When Agnew repeated virtually the same attack Sept. 29—this time with maximum publicity and before a rabidly pro-Agnew partisan audience—the real target was not Petersen but the President.

Thus, the Vice President—admittedly near the end of the political road—harbors deep-seated hostility toward the President which could erupt dangerously. Partly to minimize that danger, Mr. Nixon tried to make clear in his unexpected press conference this week that he is not trying to hound Agnew out of office. That dampened the immediate prospect of open conflict, but scarcely brought true peace.

In telling his press conference that Agnew's decision not to resign if indicted is "proper," Mr. Nixon was responding to intense heat from Agnew's political supporters in the Republican Party. But Mr. Nixon, perhaps intentionally ambiguous, left unclear whether he thought Agnew's decision is correct for the country as well as "proper" for Agnew. And he certainly did not endorse the Vice President's attacks on Petersen and the Justice Department investigation.

Indeed, assuaging emotional Agnew supporters firmly convinced that the White House has been trying to engineer Agnew's resignation may be wholly beyond the President's power, whatever he says. Suspicions grow of nefarious White House dealings against Agnew, even if always denied.

Take, for example, the curious, even exotic, trip (financed by tax money) of two top White House aides to Phoenix on Sept. 14 for secret discussion about the Agnew affair with Sen. Barry Goldwater. Goldwater, the most respected Republican Party elder, has made no effort to dissemble his strong repugnance for the way Mr. Nixon has handled the Agnew affair and has stoutly defended Agnew.

So, on Sept. 14, following earlier telephone talks with the senator in Washington, presidential counselor Bryce Harlow and assistant White House counsel Fred J. Buzhardt Jr. were dispatched to Phoenix in late afternoon with documents purporting to "prove" that (as Petersen has been quoted as saying) the prosecutors had the evidence "cold" on Agnew.

None of the three principals in that extraordinary 90-minute session in Goldwater's hilltop home will talk about it. Other informed sources, however, told us it was perfectly obvious what Harlow and Buzhardt wanted, whether or not they specifically asked for it: to convince Goldwater of Agnew's guilt in the conspiracy and brib-

ery charges and thus end his public support of the Vice President.

Other signs crop up almost daily to feed the deepest suspicions in the House of Agnew against the House of Nixon. It was presidential counselor Melvin R. Laird who first tipped off a Republican congressional leader not to get out front defending Agnew. It was the White House that telephoned Senate Republican leader Hugh Scott, urging him to call a Republican conference to warn senators against getting out on a pro-Agnew limb.

Some Agnew backers actually believe the whole case against Agnew was concocted by Mr. Nixon as a device to take the Watergate heat off himself. That, of course, is demonstrable nonsense.

But no longer is there any doubt at the highest levels of the Agnew camp that the White House—led by Mr. Nixon—has played dirty pool against the Vice President. Agnew personally made that clear privately to California friends last weekend. If he ever decides to go public against the President, he is well aware that the Watergate backdrop would provide a rich stockpile of targets.