

Mr. Agnew's Resignation

When a proud, aggressive and supremely confident politician, such as Spiro Agnew, falls from high estate, one necessarily feels compassion for the man—and that is true irrespective of what may have caused his fall. On the occasion of Mr. Agnew's resignation from the vice presidency as a result of his alleged involvement in criminal activities, one must also feel a particular measure of sympathy for the constituency he had come to represent, those men and women who earnestly believed him to be a voice of reason, tradition and no-nonsense moral rigor in the hullabaloo of contemporary American life. And, in a different sense, one feels for the country too, the much put-upon electorate that must experience this particular convulsion at the end of a series of so many disillusionments and disappointments and outright tragedies over the past decade.

From all three points of view, however—that of Mr. Agnew, that of his special political following and that of the country as a whole—it seems to us that Mr. Agnew has taken the wisest and best course available to him in pleading *nolo contendere* to a single tax evasion count and stepping out of office in exchange for a dropping of the other counts against him. Attorney General Richardson put it right: "By his resignation he has spared the nation the prolonged agony that would have attended upon his trial." In this connection we would add that the Justice Department was equally well-advised in negotiating the agreement which Mr. Agnew accepted. The public interest could hardly have been served by a remorseless pursuit of conviction and penalty at the expense of a relatively speedy resolution of questions concerning the vitality of the second highest office in the land. Mr. Agnew was Vice President. He stood to inherit the presidency at any moment in the event that Richard Nixon could no longer fulfill its functions. It would have been intolerable for that office to have been held by a man under criminal indictment and in process of waging a prolonged legal battle against federal prosecutors in the courts.

From the outset—which is to say, from the time the investigation of his conduct was made public—Mr. Agnew, as a man holding a very great public trust, had but two choices. One was effectively and definitively to deny and disprove the charges against him. For all his expostulations about "damned lies" and the rest, he never chose to take this course—either in public statements

he might have issued or in evidence he might have elected to present in an actual trial. His other choice was to do what he has now done, namely, to concede at least some of the evidence against him and to remove himself from office. If he did not actually have a wholly persuasive airtight defense, he could only have lost more than he could possibly have gained by stringing the affair out in a battle of court maneuvers.

These are important facts to understand, for the aftermath of the Agnew resignation may be a particularly volatile time in our political life, and it is essential that we grasp what it is that has happened to Mr. Agnew. He has not been "hounded" out of office or misused by the Justice Department or denied the fair trial that is every citizen's right or made a scapegoat for Watergate in some convoluted internal White House maneuver. On this last score, especially, it is important to note that Mr. Agnew almost accidentally fetched up in the net of prosecutors in Maryland who had undertaken initially to investigate the behavior of certain contractors, engineers and Maryland office holders in both parties. And whatever high-level administration maneuvering went on once Mr. Agnew's predicament came to public attention, his resignation from office—though perhaps a necessity and perhaps a temporary diversion from other Washington follies—can hardly be regarded as a long-term political plus for Mr. Nixon.

In addition to the suspicions that he was hounded unfairly from office, there seems to be a fairly widespread feeling around that Mr. Agnew was inequitably dealt with because "everyone" in politics does what he was accused of doing. The former Vice President himself, in another political time, was a most voluble critic of this and related lines of thought, which he denounced under the heading of "permissiveness." Surely, it would be a final cruel and demeaning twist of fate for his friends and supporters now to take up this irrelevant argument. In the first place "everyone" doesn't do it. In the second place, everyone isn't Vice President.

The most dangerous aspect of the solution negotiated by the Justice Department and Mr. Agnew is the fact that necessarily so many particular questions have been left judicially unanswered. The danger is that the public will now be treated to new wars over the implications of those unanswered questions, with Mr. Agnew claiming on the one side that the evidence put forward by the Justice Department was not just untested in court but demonstrably malicious and false, and with others receiving these charges as demonstrable proven truth. The charges themselves are pretty fierce and pretty disheartening, but one should remember two things about them. One is that they were not subjected to the test of a courtroom trial. The other is that they were not tested in a courtroom because Mr. Agnew chose that they not be.

Americans don't much care for ambiguity. And politicians and public officials don't much care for having it thought on any occasion that they were wrong or irresponsible—or worse. So it will not be surprising if a painful dispute ensues over the "real meaning" of the Justice Department's recitation of its evidence and the subsequent resignation of Mr. Agnew. But it will be no less unfortunate for that. The unanswered questions are in fact a condition of the solution that has been reached, and that solution has salvaged what dignity and integrity there was to be salvaged for the processes of government in an unprecedented ugly situation. The benefits to the public that accrue from that solution are fragile and vulnerable to political recklessness. We think it is in everyone's interest, including Mr. Agnew's, that they be preserved.

