WXPost

OCT 1 1 1973

Spiro Agnew: A Rapid Rise From Obscurity

Spiro Theodore Agnew exuberantly rode the American Dream until it all came crashing down on him within a few minutes in a Baltimore federal courthouse yesterday.

He was the son of a Greek vegetable peddler, and had made it to the nation's second highest office, the vice presidency. He began his tenure as "Spiro Who?" and achieved something of national folk hero status at the height of his popularity.

Despite the alliterative bombast that was his trademark, Agnew spoke the mind and the heart of postwar American suburbia—the environment in which his politics were molded.

He gave a voice to the anxieties of that amorphous sociological entity, Middle America, on such issues as crime, race, radical demonstrators and the communications media. It was the saddest of ironies that Spiro Agnew, a thunderer for law and order, had to end his political career with the admission that he cheated on his taxes.

"The disease of our times," he said repeatedly during his first campaign with President Nixon, "is an artificial and masochistic sophistication—the vague uneasiness that our values are false, that there is something wrong with being patriotic, honest, moral or hardworking."

Agnew was born Nov. 9, 1918, in downtown Baltimore, where his father, Theodore Spiro Agnew, who had emigrated from Greece 21 years earlier, operated a restaurant.

The elder Agnew, who died in 1963, shortened his name from the unwieldy Anagnostopoulos after leaving his homeland of Peloponnesus, married Margaret Akers of Bristol, Va., and began working to achieve a share of the American dream.

But the depression of the 1930s forced him to close his restaurant and go into the streets with a fruit and vegetable cart—providing a brush with poverty that gave his young son a later appreciation of the security of middle-class affluence.

After graduating from Baltimore's public school system, Agnew studied chemistry at Johns Hopkins University, quit after two years and entered the Army. He was discharged as a captain after service in the Battle of the Bulge. He was recalled for a year during the Korean War.

After World War II, Agnew studied law at the University of Baltimore and graduated in 1947. His early career as a lawyer was difficult—with failures in his own office and in a large firm. He worked as an insurance claims adjuster, then as personnel manager for a small grocery chain before trying law again after the Korean War.

Gradually his career began falling into place.

On the advice of a fatherly senior partner in his first law firm, Agnew had switched his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican—not for ideological reasons at first but because the far larger number of young Democratic attorneys made his chances for political advancement in that party slim.

The switch paid off in 1957. Agnew was appointed a minority member of his county's Democratic-controlled board of zoning appeals and when the GOP later won control of the county, he became the board's chairman.

From a variety of PTA and civic organizations, from the forum of a zoning board that is closely involved with citizen problems and from his campaign for county home rule, Agnew began to make a name in his county.

In 1962, running on a reform platform against a splintered Democratic Party, Agnew was elected county executive of Baltimore County, which surrounds the problem-ridden inner city of Baltimore. With its virtually all-white population of 600,000, Baltimore County had the growth and development problems typical of America's suburbs.

Though he did well enough as county executive, it was clear to Agnew that by 1966 the Democrats were well enough organized again to defeat him if he ran for a second term. So, still virtually unknown in the rest of Maryland, he decided to run for governor.

A three-way Democratic primary ended with Democrats again in full disarray, this time on a state level. George P. Mahoney, an inveterate candidate running on a blatantly white racist platform, was nominated for governor.

Against this background, Agnew was welcomed by Maryland liberals and Negroes, although his own record in civil rights was middle-of-the-road. He carried some black precincts with 90 per cent of the vote.

Agnew brought a new kind of administration to the somnolent State House in Annapolis—with civil service appointments replacing patronage and technicians and specialists replacing politicos in top staff positions. He implemented a thorough reorganization of the executive branch along functional and managerial lines.

He worked well with the state legislature, where his party had little more than token representation, and with its partisan Democratic leaders. He won enactment of a major tax reform, the state's first broad antipollution and mental health treatment legislation and new highway programs.

Outside of Maryland, he moved easily into the guiding councils of the Republican and National Governors Conferences. A few years earlier, he had so impressed the National Association of Counties that, at the first convention he attended, he was elected to its executive council and touted as its future president.

He broke new racial ground in the traditionally conservative Maryland State House by appointing blacks to his staff and by securing enactment of the state's first open-housing law and repeal of its centuries-old ban on mixed marriage. He issued a strict equal employment directive for state agencies.

But a series of events in early 1968, climaxed by a blunt lecture to black moderates in Baltimore after riots in that city, opened a chasm between Agnew and many of the state's white liberals and blacks that never was again closed.

"I publicly repudiate, condemn and reject all white racists," Agnew told the blacks he had called together in Baltimore. "I call upon you to publicly repudiate, condemn and reject all black racists. This, so far, you have not been willing to do."

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They had not been willing, he told them, because "you were intimidated by veiled threats; you were stung by insinuations that you were Mr. Charlie's boy, by epithets like 'Uncle Tom.'"

At this language, taken variously as insulting, insensitive or simply naive, more than half the 100 blacks he was addressing walked out. The next few days made it clear to him that, whether he had planned it or not, his appeal was now to a far different electorate — the disturbed white middle class.

Buoyed by hundreds of telegrams and letters applauding his Baltimore speech, Agnew adopted a "law and order" theme. "I have a lot of respect for a firm hand," he began telling audiences, "and God knows we haven't seen enough of that lately. You can't accept civil disobedience as a way of life."

Agnew had never confined himself to a single political ideology.

In 1950 he broke into campaign politics by helping elect Brig. Gen. James P. S. Devereaux, a rock-ribbed conservative Marine hero, to Congress. In 1964, he headed the Maryland campaign of William Scranton. In 1967-68, he supported, in turn, George Romney, Nelson A Rockefeller and Richard M. Nixon for the GOP presidential nomination.

Asked about his political past, Agnew told reporters, "I guess you've got to say, when you get down to the end result, it's what you really feel politically is the proper thing to do."

His apparent drift from moderate to conservative, he said at one press conference, was an optical illusion.

"I try to call the shots the way I see them," he explained. "I had a fellow say to me the other day, 'How come you have changed your stance from that of liberal to conservative?' and I said, 'Well, I really haven't; it's just that I've stayed still while literally thousands of people have rushed past me in a wild dash to the left'."

His shift from Rockefeller to Nixon came after Agnew felt himself publicly embarrassed by Rockefeller.

He had organized a national Draft Rockefeller organization, opened a headquarters in Annapolis and won the public commitment of several prominent Republicans — all undoubtedly with at least tacit support from Rockefeller.

Fully expecting an announcement of candidacy by Rockefeller, Agnew invited reporters and friends to his office to watch on television and share the moment with him. To his obvious and utter chagrin, Rockefeller said he would not run.

Later, it was said by the staffs of both governors that a call had been placed from Rockfeller to Agnew shortly before the announcement, but that Agnew had not been there to take it. The damage was done, however, and within a few days Agnew had his first serious political discussion with Mr. Nixon, whom he had met only a few months earlier.

The first report in May, 1968, that Mr. Nixon was considering Agnew for his running mate brought a shrugging response from the Maryland governor:

"I don't consider myself standby equipment. I think it would be the height of temerity for me to suggest that coming from a state that never had a vice presidential possibility and being only a little over a year in office, that this is something serious enough for me to consider at this time."

Agnew went to the GOP National Convention as chairman of an uncommitted Maryland delegation, but shortly after he arrived, he endorsed Mr. Nixon. Then, in his first performance on the national political stage, he delivered the speech nominating the next President.

The next day, after a night-long search for a candidate acceptable to North and South, Mr. Nixon was telling a puzzled Republican Party that he wanted Agnew as his running mate because he needed "a man who was, first, qualified to be President; second, one who could campaign effectively and, third, one who could assume the new responsibilities that I will give the new Vice President particularly in the area of the problems of the states and the cities."

To reporters, Mr. Nixon added:

"I know Ted Agnew well. We have had long and tough discussions. We have examined each other's ideas, debated issues and tested each other. He has real depth and genuine warmth. Having watched his performance as governor of Maryland for two years, I was deeply impressed by his tremendous brain power, great courage and unprejudiced legal mind. He has vigor, imagination and above all he acts. Under pressure, he is one of the best-poised and controlled . . . he has the attributes of a statesman of the first rank."

It was clear, nonetheless, that Agnew's prime attribute at that moment was his acceptability to Southern, as well as Northern, Republican figures.

Despite Mr. Nixon's ringing endorsement, an attempt was made on the floor to nominate George Romney instead, but Agnew was nominated handily.

The gaffes began a few days later.

The vice presidential nominee called Hubert Humphrey "soft on crime" and "squishy soft" on Communism. Then, prodded by other Republicans, he retracted. He referred to Polish-Americans as "Polacks" in a Chicago speech; on his campaign plane he jokingly referred to an American reporter of Japanese descent as a "fat Jap."

Associated Press

Vice President Agnew was photographed with his family in 1968: standing are daughters Pamela (left), then 25, and Susan, then 20. Seated from left are daughter Kimberly, then 12, Mrs. Agnew holding granddaughter Michelle, and Michelle's mother, Ann, who is married to Mr. Agnew's son, J. Rand Agnew.

United Press International

At the 1968 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Spiro Agnew and Richar Nixon respond to cheers after their acceptance speeches.

He angered poverty workers with the seemingly flip observation that "When you've seen one city slum you've seen them all." He announced at one campaign stop that the Nixon-Agnew slate had a formula for ending the war in Vietnam, but that they would not make it public until late in the campaign. The next day, he said there was no such plan.

Aides from the Nixon camp were attached to Agnew's campaign staff and the vice presidential candidate was shunted to the sidelines in the late days of the campaign, speaking mostly in the familiar white suburbs. On election eve, in contrast to the Humphrey-Muskie ticket. Mr. Nixon appeared without his running mate on a wind-up telethon.

Once in office, Agnew embraced the traditionally belittled role of Vice President.

Senators were surprised to find that for the first time they could remember, a Vice President took seriously his constitutional task of presiding over the U.S. Senate. Agnew was there almost daily, arranging his travel schedule so that it would not conflict with Senate sessions.

His official duties included leadership roles on a variety of presidential panels, the National Aeronautics and Space Council, the Urban Affairs and Environmental Quality Control councils, the Youth Opportunity Council and the Peace Corps Advisory Council.

After several quiet months learning his way around official Washington, Agnew, late in the first year of his vice presidency, was back in the headlines, bluntly defending the Nixon administration and Middle America

against antiwar demonstrators and the news media and traveling to Asia on a presidential goodwill mission.

When Agnew spoke this time, it was with greater impact and the unmistakable forethought of the administration.

Between the October and November antiwar moratoriums, the Vice President excoriated the demonstrators as "an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals." They were led, he said, by "hard core dissidents and professional anarchists."

Less than a month later, in a nationally televised speech in Des Moines, Iowa, Agnew began a two-part attack on the practices of the news media. That night his target was television; a week later it was newspaper publishers.

"A small group of men," he said, decide the day's news for the television networks. "We cannot measure this power and influence by traditional democratic standards for these men can create national issues overnight. They can make or break—by their coverage and commentary—a moratorium on the war. They can elevate men from local obscurity to national prominence within a week. . . . For millions of Americans, the network reporter who covers a continuing issue, like ABM or civil rights, becomes in effect the presiding judge in a national trial by jury."

A week later, in Montgomery, Ala., Agnew attacked publishing companies which, he said, were able to control public opinion through their large holdings of newspapers, magazines and television stations, "all grinding out the same editorial line."

Publishers and network officials cried foul, accusing the Vice President and the administration of trying to intimidate the news media.

But Agnew pointed to the windup of his Des Moines speech, in which he said, "I have made no attempt to suggest answers. These answers must come from the media men. They are challenged to turn their critical powers on themselves." His speeches had been intended as a challenge, not a threat, he said.

Soon the Vice President was off on his first diplomatic mission—a 22-day, 10-nation goodwill visit to the South Pacific and Asia.

When he became Vice President, Agnew had met only one foreign head of state—Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger of West Germany, on a trip to the University of Maryland's European Branch graduation ceremonies in Heidelberg.

At the funeral of Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, foreign dignitaries were brought before Agnew on an assembly-line basis to familiarize him with them.

Agnew's talent for biting and outspoken rhetoric, which after his 1969 attacks on Vietnam war critics, television commentators and the press was his trademark, soon became a major political weapon of the Nixon administration.

In the congressional elections of 1970, President Nixon assigned the Vice President the chore of campaigning for administration friends—and cutting down administration enemies.

Introducing a new phrase into the political lexicon, the Vice President declared war on "radical liberals" who concocted and pressed wild social schemes at the expense of Middle America. The Republican Party needed to pick up seven Senate seats for control and thus Senate Democrats became Agnew's prime targets. He called them, among other things, "nattering nabobs of negativism" and members of the "4-H Club—hopeless, hysterical, hypochondriacs of history."

There was, however, one Republican up for re-election whose stiff opposition to the Nixon Vietnam policy also put him in the "radiclib" category — Charles E. Goodell of New York.

Goodell, appointed to the Senate by Gov. Rockefeller after the death of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, had never run a statewide race and was in danger of running third behind the Democratic nominee, Rep. Richard L. Ottinger, and the candidate of the state's Conservative Party, James L. Buckley.

In a nice bit of two-stage political hatchetry, Agnew, under marching orders from the White House, attacked Goodell head-on, calling him a "radiclib"—with the anticipated result of generating liberal New York sympathy for him. The move undercut Ottinger and Buckley was elected—another vote for Mr. Nixon in his drive for a "new majority" in the Senate. For all of Agnew's speeches, though, the drive failed and the Democrats retained control of both houses.

The end of the ineffectual 1970 campaign marked the beginning of two years of speculation about Agnew's political future, and two years of restlessness and disenchantment for him.

Agnew, like Mr. Nixon before him, had become a most contentious Vice President, winning strong supporters with his attacks on the opposition but engendering deep bitterness among his foes. He accused his critics of "polarizing" the country but he himself called for "positive polarization."

He expressed resentment to friends that he was used as the administration's political battering ram, and was paid little heed in policy decisions and administration of domestic programs, which were his forte as county executive and governor.

He told friends particularly that the rise of John D. Ehrlichman, a politically inexperienced Seattle lawyer, as Mr. Nixon's chief domestic policy man nettled him. That, and talk among White House aides that he was a political buffoon and clown to be given only dirty work.

The appointment of former Democratic Gov. John B. Connally of Texas as Secretary of Treasury in December, 1970, and Connally's swift emergence as the strong man of the Nixon Cabinet, triggered inevitable speculation that the President would dump him in 1972 and seek a second term with Connally as his running mate.

Through all this, Agnew maintained his customary aplomb, insisting he had not decided whether, in fact he wanted a second term. But the hard political facts were in his favor: in his first two tumultuous years as Vice President, he had built up a powerful constituency, and in the end it dictated his selection for a second term.

But he always maintained a public posture of loyalty and, his friends said, a private posture of respect and deference toward the President, if not toward all those around him.

Again in the 1972 campaign, Agnew bore the brunt of Republican campaigning, while Mr. Nixon stayed at the White House "running the country" and projecting a statesmanlike image that made him most difficult to assail.

In the Watergate fiasco that broke in June, 1972, and eventually engulfed the President, Agnew never was charged with any involvement, in either the break-in of Democratic headquarters or the later cover-up. While other Republicans kept silent, he gave outspoken support to Mr. Nixon.

The final downturn in Agnew's political life was signaled in a letter addressed to him last Aug. 1 by George Beall, U.S. attorney for Maryland. It advised him of the pending criminal investigation of kickbacks from contractors during his tenure as governor of Maryland.

On Aug. 8, two days after the Baltimore investigation surfaced in the press, Agnew called a televised press conference and denounced the allegation as "damned lies." He acknowledged that he had received campaign contributions from contractors, but insisted that such practices were traditional and anyone who might be surprised by the disclosure was "naive."

More press disclosures followed, detailing the kickback and extortion allegations that had been made against the Vice President by Maryland contractors who were talking to federal prosecutors.

This oened up a running war between Agnew and the Justice Department during which he repeatedly charged that officials of the agency were leaking prejudicial details of the investigation to newsmen. He denounced the leads on Aug. 21 as "a clear and outrageous effort to influence the outcome of possible grand jury deliberations."

Relations between the Vice President and President Nixon became increasingly distant, although the President maintained a posture of carefully qualified support for his running-mate.

At a news conference on Sept. 5, the President pointedly expressed his confidence "in the Vice President's integrity during the period that he has served as Vice President . . ."

But the breach between the President and his Vice President widened visibly although the two men met alone on several more occasions. Not a word was disclosed to the press about the subject of their discussions.

On Sept. 25, in a daring gambit, Agnew addressed a letter to House Speaker Carl Albert (D-Okla.) and asked that the House undertake a "full inquiry" of the charges against him in the Justice Department investigation. The House leadership rejected the request.

On Sept. 29, the Vice President made a poweful emotional bid for public approval in a speech to 2,000 warmly partisan delegates to the National Federation of Republican Women in Los Angeles.

He accused the Justice Department of attempting to destroy him with "malicious and outrageous" news leaks. In a perhaps unintentional parody of the Sherman-like disavowal that is a tradition of American politics, Agnew said that if indicted, he would not resign.

"I'm their big trophy," he told the cheering Republican women. ". . . Well, I'm not going to fall down and be his victim, I assure you."

President Nixon on Oct. 3 repeated his words of praise for Agnew for "distinguished service as Vice President." Mr. Nixon emphasized that the charges against Agnew "do not relate in any way to his activities as Vice President" but added that the allegations were "serious and not frivolous."

This was in marked contrast to a remark made by the President in 1968 describing why he chose Agnew as his running mate.

"The guy has got it or he doesn't," said the President. "If he doesn't, then Nixon has made a bum choice."