

David S. Broder

The Agnew Withdrawal Pains

So it is over, prematurely, for Spiro T. Agnew. From beginning to end he eluded us, concealing his true character behind that oddly mixed facade of hot rhetoric and cool, correct appearance.

He treated public office not primarily as a place of decision-making but as a platform for pronouncing judgment on the actions of others. And now the judgment of the law has come down hard on him.

This reporter is credited with having forecast both his nomination for Vice President in 1968 and his resignation this year, and you can find clippings that make it seem so. But the truth of the matter is that I was as slack-jawed with surprise as anyone when both the appointment and resignation came to pass. Nor do I feel, even now, that I know what caused either his selection or his resignation.

What I do know is that some time between his defiant, fighting speech in Los Angeles on Sept. 29 and his craven appearance before a party fund-raising dinner in Chicago five days later, Mr. Agnew must have received a devastating piece of news.

Having watched the first "I will not resign" speech on television, I could hardly believe it was the same man I saw on the rostrum in Chicago, uttering his plaintive, self-composed epitaph: "A candle is only so long, and eventually it burns out."

He looked that night like a man who had been kicked in the groin. To see him was to share his agony.

The chief question now is what the Agnew constituency in the country makes of this.

Mr. Agnew is the first great conservative hero to be so completely disgraced since the current age of political disillusionment began a decade ago. Mr. Nixon has been brought low by the Watergate revelations, but his humiliation thus far has not been so total as Mr. Agnew's, nor has the shock been so large.

As my colleague, Lou Cannon, has noted, conservatives felt and said that Mr. Nixon was "too smart" to have been involved in the Watergate crimes, but believed and professed Mr. Agnew to have been "too honest" to cheat.

That's an important distinction, and it measures the likelihood of a greater emotional impact from Agnew's disgrace. The true believers will be searching for any explanation less traumatic than a concession that they were the victims of fraud, that they were conned by a man who preached one set of values and practiced another.

Even as he was pleading no contest to the tax evasion count, Agnew was continuing to hint that he had been the victim of some monstrous conspiracy arranged by the prosecutors. If he and his spokesmen continue to press that conspiracy theory—arguing that Mr. Nixon or the Justice Department procured the evidence against him in order to remove him from the 1976 presidential field—there will be some sizable number of American conservatives who will believe it. After all, there are liberals who believe to this day that Abe Fortas was driven from the Supreme Court by a Justice Department conspiracy.

But a larger number of conservatives, I suspect, will simply add the Agnew case to their already bulging inventory of disillusioning experiences with politicians. Because they thought Agnew was something other than a politician, the loss of faith will be worse.

That is how it went on the liberal side in this decade. When Lyndon Johnson was transformed in liberal eyes from the architect of the Great Society to the commander of an undeclared war in Vietnam, the liberals cried betrayal—but still told themselves they had always known he was a "wheeler-dealer" and capable of duplicity. But when Eugene McCarthy "copped out" on the kids who had supported him in 1968 and when George McGovern proved his gift for hypocrisy with his "1,000 per cent" support of Sen. Thomas Eagleton, the crash of hopes was much louder. Their fans really believed these men were of a purer, better strain than the mere politicians they had challenged for the nomination.

The Agnew supporters—who saw him as their champion against the corruptive forces of radicals, the counterculture and the press—are now suffering similar withdrawal pangs. Those of us who were not outspoken admirers of the Vice President can perhaps best convey our sympathy with their plight by buttoning our lips and resisting any temptation to indulge in smug self-satisfaction.

There is, in truth, no cause for celebration. The Agnew case, like so many earlier disillusionments affecting liberal leaders, makes it just that much harder for the people of this country to maintain that "full faith and confidence" that we once thought was the birthright of this nation.