

## For Mr. Agnew

By Tom Wicker

## IN THE NATION

With no intent to violate the season of good will, it has to be asked why the State of Maryland should make further exception in the case of Spiro T. Agnew and suspend rather than disbar him from the practice of law. He has already been shown more favor than would have been granted most high officials who did not contest a felony charge involving moral turpitude and there is nothing in American life much more disgraceful than the double standard of justice that Mr. Agnew wants extended to him again.

What more does the country owe to Mr. Agnew, anyway? He was allowed to bargain his way out of a felony trial in return for resigning his high office; he departed Government with a letter of commendation from Richard Nixon; and although out of office, he is being served by a staff of eight aides, in Government quarters, to which he is driven in a Government automobile, by Secret Service agents, who also guard him around the clock.

Even so, when he appealed in Maryland court for "a reasonable period of suspension," rather than disbarment, "so that at some later day I might resume my practice and attempt to bring credit upon my state and upon my profession," many Americans probably responded generously and hoped that it could be so.

The problem is that such generosity is all too routinely extended, in the American criminal justice system, to men like Spiro Agnew—to educated, affluent whites with enough money or standing to hire good lawyers, and enough knowledge of the way things work to buy or bargain their way out of trouble. At the same time, generosity is just as routinely refused to the poor, the ignorant, the blacks, the ethnic group members, or to anyone without power, influence, or money.

That is the double standard Mr. Agnew asks Maryland to continue in his highly publicized case; that is the double standard that, extended to him in the soft penalty he received originally, already has caused much bitterness, derision and cynicism in the ghettos and in the prisons.

Actually, if anything about the Agnew matter should prove beneficial, it would be for his situation to dramatize the plight of the ex-offender trying to go straight in a fearful and insensitive world. For most such persons, it is difficult to be bonded, if a prospective job requires that; many employers lump together all ex-offenders as "murderers and rapists," and reject them all; some even refuse to

consider anyone for employment if the applicant has an arrest record, let alone a conviction.

If Mr. Agnew now sought a job in a bank carrying Federal deposit insurance, for example, he would have to have the written consent of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, because the offense he did not contest and for which he was convicted involved a breach of trust. A man of Mr. Agnew's background and standing might obtain F.D.I.C. approval; but what about a poor black or Puerto Rican with little or no education who had served time for larceny?

A survey made for the Alliance for a Safer New York recently disclosed that in New York State—which is not untypical—ex-offenders are not allowed to work as veterinarians, dentists, doctors, pharmacists, junk dealers, auctioneers, insurance adjusters, X-ray technicians, real estate brokers, funeral home operators, and many other occupations high and low. As an example of the latter, no ex-offender is allowed to be a waiter, busboy, bellhop or even a dishwasher in any place where liquor is served.

Almost no job that requires state licensing is open to the ex-offender (although some prisons train inmates for such occupations as barbering, for which they subsequently cannot get a license). The usual result of such restrictive state laws and business policies is that the ex-offender either cannot get a job or gets a dead-end job that gives him or her no chance to rise and every temptation to return to crime. The A.S.N.Y. survey quoted a study showing that 62 per cent of former inmates in Federal prisons were employed in low-level service jobs and other unskilled occupations.

The painful, near-tragic irony is that a society terrified of violent crime persists in attitudes that virtually force offenders emerging from the prisons to repeat their offenses. Yet the evidence is overwhelming that most of them would rather work, and are capable of accepting training and holding down decent jobs. But such jobs are seldom open to them, which is a primary reason why the cycle of crime goes violently on.

It would be splendid, therefore, to demand generosity for Spiro Agnew if there were a general demand for generosity for all those who run afoul of the law, pay a penalty, then seek a decent place in society. But there is no such demand; and suspension for Mr. Agnew would be just one more example of a double standard that shames us all.