

Here Comes the Bribe

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A HEARTBEAT AWAY: *The Investigation and Resignation of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew.* By Richard M. Cohen and Jules Witcover. Viking Press/Washington Post. 363 pp. \$10

By FRED GRAHAM

AMERICANS TEND TO ACCEPT the crooks among their local politicians with a certain ironic humor. There used to be a

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House member in Tennessee who called himself "the best legislator money can buy." Alabama's Kissin' Jim Folsom got elected by saying he stole but was honest about admitting it. Mayor Curley of Boston won an election from the jailhouse.

But after a politician has managed to work his way up through these sometimes seamy ranks to become president or vice president, it has until recently been unthinkable that he would be a crook. People just assumed that nobody who made it to one of these high offices would risk his place in history by being corrupt.

So under the clearest of circumstances, the fall of Spiro T. Agnew would have taken some heavy explaining to the

American people. But Agnew's departure could hardly have been murkier. His case was blurred by the plea bargaining that produced his resignation and his plea of no contest to a charge of failing to pay taxes on bribe money—coupled with his seemingly contradictory statement to the judge that "at no time have I enriched myself at the expense of the public trust."

This left two very loose ends dangling. Was Agnew really as crooked as the Justice Department made him out to be? And if so, why did they let him off so easy?

The authors of this book evidently believed that the public would be most painfully torn by the first question. They are two journalists who were ideally positioned to answer it—Richard Cohen, who covered the Agnew story for the Washing-

ton Post, and Jules Witcover, a political writer for the Post. What they have done in this interesting and important book is provide the detail and documentation of Agnew's guilt that a trial or impeachment would have given.

In many ways their narrative is fuller than the rules of evidence would have permitted legal proceedings to be. We learn, for instance, that the prosecutors turned up "very damaging information about aspects of Agnew's personal life"; that in trying to mollify them, Agnew offered to issue a cloying statement of praise for the prosecutors—just as he was denouncing them in public for allegedly leaking stories about him—and that he backed away from his attack on Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen because President Nixon passed the word to knock it off.

All this detail makes it apparent that the prosecutors, who were afraid Agnew might somehow emerge a martyr, opened their files and memories to the authors. The result sometimes makes the prosecutors come across like the Rover Boys with Harvard Law degrees, and Elliot Richardson as the first attorney general in history to have a halo.

But it does fill in the details of the Agnew case enough to persuade any reader that Agnew was indeed a crook; that he had taken graft for years; that he continued to demand and receive it after he became vice president; and that he well deserved to be removed and convicted.

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In fact, those who feared that the public might doubt Agnew's guilt misread the temper of the times. There have been more complaints that the prosecutors let him off too easy. The authors struggled manfully to make the case that Agnew got his just deserts because of the disgrace of it all—but I wasn't convinced, and I got the impression they weren't either.

The final irony would be if there were to be an Agnew backlash that affected President Nixon's fortunes. As more and more talk is heard of a possible "Agnew Deal" in Mr. Nixon's future, there are increasing hints in Washington that Congress might insist on a tougher bargain this time.

There is a final question that is the most tantalizing of all, and which the authors have left largely for future historians to undertake: Why did Agnew do it?

He always had an odd scale of values for a politician, hinting he might forego running for President to make a killing as a corporate director and lecturer. He also developed a taste for *la dolce vita* that he couldn't afford without taking graft. But that still doesn't explain why the glory of the office wasn't enough for Agnew—and it raises unsettling doubts as to how fragile the traditions of our highest offices might prove to be, now that the spell has been broken. □

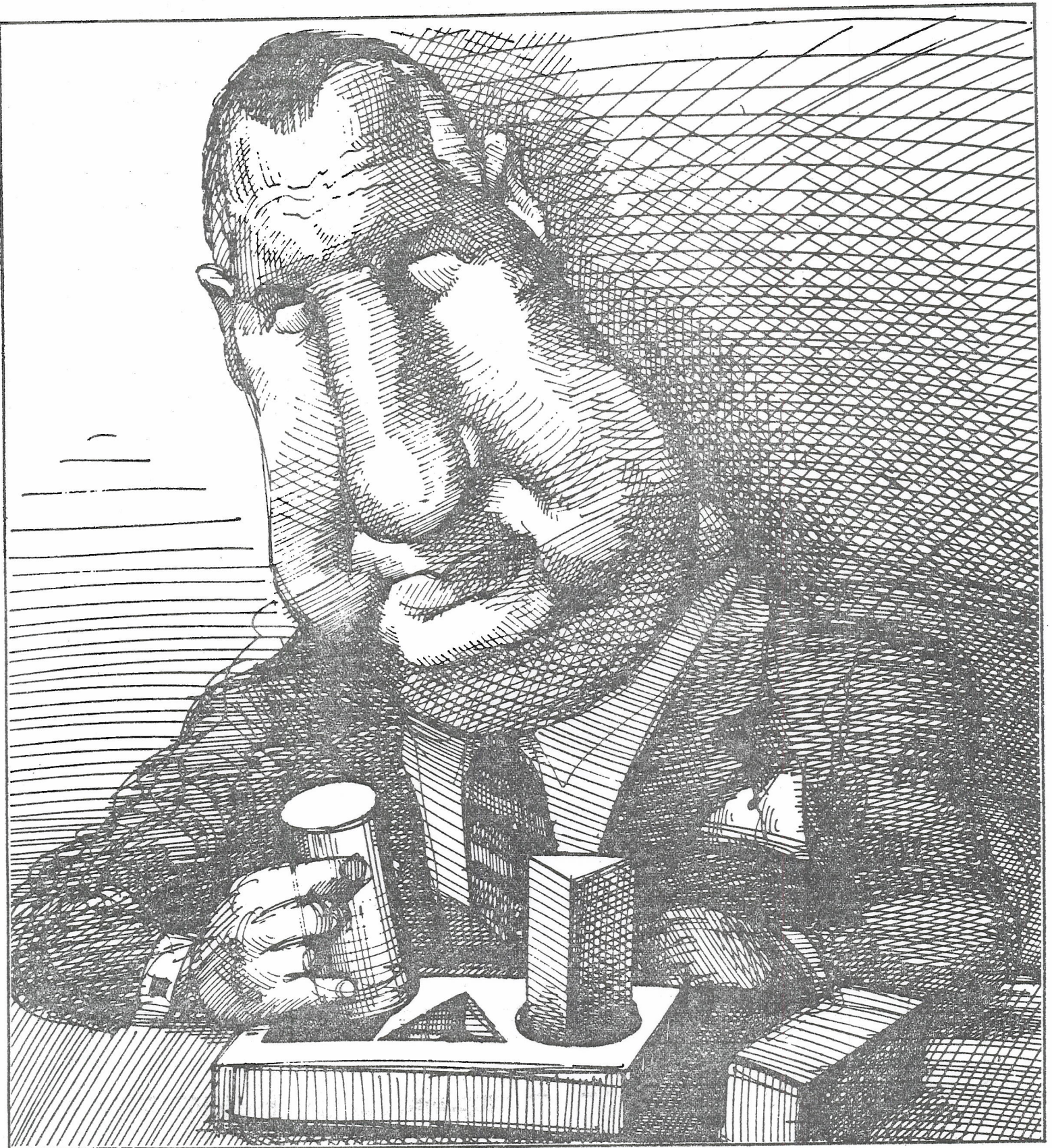
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