

George F. Will

Mr. Agnew: Fanning The Fires of Resentment

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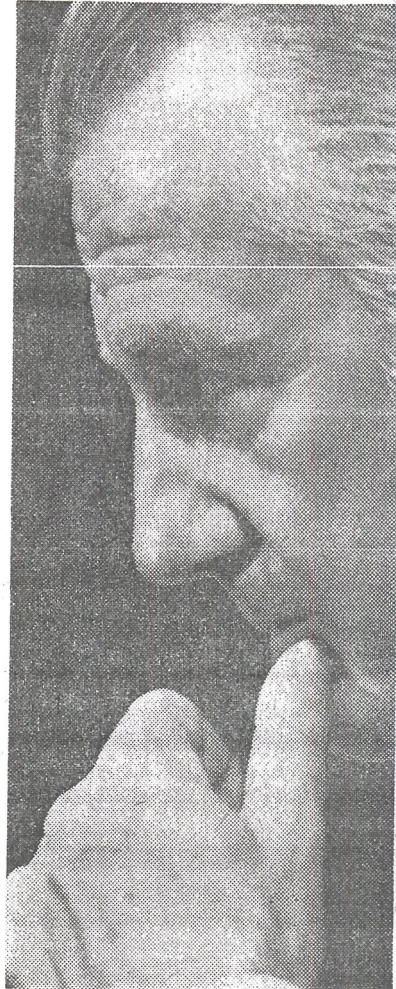
Not to be outdone by his former master, who celebrates Disraeli's government, Mr. Agnew, uninterested in government to the end, expended the nub of his burnt out candle in homage to the writer who made his first splash emulating Disraeli's dandyism—Oscar Wilde.

In his essay on "The Decay of Lying" Wilde praised "the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain for proof of any kind." Wilde reserved special contempt for the U.S., "that country having adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie."

There are two possible explanations for Mr. Agnew's speech. Either he was forced to make it, as part of the bargain struck concerning his plea, or he is a true artist, using his "farewell" speech to stoke the dangerous fires burning in America's "constituency of resentment."

This constituency is the free-floating mass of the disgruntled. It is without allegiance to party and, in the spirit of

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its penchant for patriotic themes, it is fueled by the hostile suspicion about our institutions that suffused Mr. Agnew's speech.

It includes the Wallace vote. It also included the Agnew vote, a submerged but significant component of Mr. Nixon's otherwise tepid constituency.

Its members believe they are not getting their just deserts from American society, and that being victimized is necessary and sufficient proof of virtue. Now in a sudden flash they have seen their most fevered imaginings deliciously confirmed. Mr. Agnew, the symbol of resentment armed, has been done in by establishment forces symbolized by Elliot Richardson.

Mr. Agnew ended speaking about "America's strength and her glories," asserting that "our democracy" is "working better than ever before." But the core of his speech was the insinuation — he did not have the courage to boldly state his dreary convictions — that the American system of justice, from the top of the Justice Department on down, conspired to force him from elective office.

He said he wanted to avoid "a paroxysm of bitterness," but he used his speech to incite bitterness among the resentful by charging that there was no way for him to get a fair trial. He distributed blame for this across the public and private sectors, the government and the press. (The economic interpretation of history is dead: "faceless editors" have replaced "faceless financiers" in populists' nightmares.)

Agnew dismissed as "insinuations" the 40 pages of hard allegations — specific as to names, dates, places,

amounts of cash — published by the Justice Department.

He complained that the allegations were never "proven" or "independently corroborated or tested by cross examination." But such proving, corroborating and testing is what *trials* are for. And he begged Congress and then bargained away his office in a desperate campaign to prevent a trial.

The hollow heart of his speech was the assertion that it was "not realistic" to say that he was the "initiator" of extortion, and that "any experienced political observer" would laugh at the notion that the witnesses against him were "innocent victims of illegal enticements from me." In the annals of American rhetoric, this offering from a practiced rhetorician will not rank with "Caesar had his Brutus. . ."

But the speech may be enough to keep the "constituency of resentment" contentedly chewing a new rancor. This constituency is perpetually hankering for a solitary figure of passionate convictions whose solitude will make him conspicuous, and whose convictions will guarantee him martyrdom. This fate always confirms the sour belief that the American deck is stacked against those whose grievances are the wages of their virtuousness.

Perhaps it would be best for the "constituency of resentment" to swallow Mr. Agnew's speech. The constituency might be less inflamed by Mr. Agnew's "martyrdom" than by having to face the fact that, even in his final speech, far from being the pillar of faith in an administration of malleable men, Mr. Agnew was the disposable bottle into which Mr. Nixon poured whatever cheap wine he chose.