

F. Root

# The State Of Things

## Spiro In Wonderland

By DON and VAL HYMES

It was a bad dream repeated. Spiro Agnew was standing there again in a courtroom, telling the world he should not be condemned for his actions because everybody does the same thing and gets away with it.

Even the three trial judges, coming from the circuit and supreme benches in towns familiar to all of us, seemed touched ever so slightly by the Alice in Wonderland atmosphere in the high-ceilinged Annapolis courtroom on a snowy, cold day.

Said Humpty Dumpty: "There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

"I meant, 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

In that courtroom that day, the logic of Spiro Agnew—who had indeed had a great fall—almost rang true. In fact, before he rose to speak in his own behalf, the cards appeared stacked against him.

The scene was one that rarely interests the public—a Maryland Bar Association disciplinary hearing growing out of a no-contest plea to income tax evasion—the kind of white-collar crime many businessmen are expected to commit.

But from the Bar Association's point of view, it was far more serious. Even Agnew and his attorneys saw that, conceding that a mere reprimand would be "silly."

The fact that this lawyer had been a public official, holding the highest office Maryland could bestow and the second highest in the nation, plus the fact that the

money he concealed from the government was "tainted," made it even more imperative for his professional peers to act. The integrity of the Bar was at stake.

One of the Bar Association attorneys, demanding disciplinary action, said, "A large segment of the public is disenchanted, skeptical, disdainful, even distrustful of the legal profession. . . and it's not just Watergate. . . and it's not just this case."

His colleague added that the purpose was not to punish but to protect. There were many arguments offered to try to find a punishment to fit the crime, but the cornerstone of the Bar Association's position was that the public had the right to know this would not happen again—that "the public has the right to expect the legal profession to keep its own house clean."

And Agnew's attorneys agreed. One of them said, "No observer of the political scene could be unaware of the public outcry for reform" or that "public confidence in government is shaken."

Their client is a man whose name has been dishonored for the history books of the future. Spiro Agnew is a man who has fallen from the highest office ever achieved by a Marylander, a man who copped a plea to earn the label of felon.

Yet he carries with him an aura of confidence and innocence at all times. And there are many who are convinced he is still a victim of the Watergate syndrome, a scapegoat for the President, the one politician who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar while everybody else slips away with fistfuls of goodies.

This time was no different. He spoke from his own skimpy notes, looking the judges squarely in the eye, leaning on a lectern but standing tall. He could have been defending a client.

His voice shook as he begged

the judges not to strip him of his means of livelihood so he could "perhaps some day come back and bring credit to myself, my state, and to the legal profession." He upstaged his eloquent attorneys, who had warned against "professional decapitation" and asked, "is there no limit to the penance society requires?"

"Off with his head!" cried the Queen of Hearts.

He said he did not fight the charge of tax evasion for some "very good reasons which will remain locked within me for the foreseeable future." At no time did he admit wrongdoing. Again he blamed the media and the witnesses against him. Again he outlined a long, dedicated lifetime of service, this time to the legal profession.

"What is at stake here," he said, "is how I practice law in the future, how I practiced law in the past. . . my conduct over a long career. . ."

"I can't believe that!" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Spiro Agnew would have us believe more. He would have us follow him through the looking glass, where all mimsy were the borogroves, and where what was corrupt, wasn't.