



FORMER VICE PRESIDENT SPIRO AGNEW IN HIS LIMOUSINE

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## THE MOOD

# Week of Shocks

Even for a nation surfeited with surprise and sensation, the week's events brought multiple shocks:

► A Vice President who had piously proclaimed the need for stiff morality and stern judges was revealed as a grafter; he abruptly resigned in deserved disgrace, copping a plea to stay out of jail. Within 56 hours the President nominated House Republican Leader Gerald Ford to replace Spiro T. Agnew. In choosing the amiable House workhorse, Nixon for once did the easy and popular thing.

► A federal appeals court ruled in often biting language that the President must yield up his Watergate tapes, serving clear notice that a serious threat to Richard Nixon's own political survival still looms.

► The full gravity of the war in the Middle East, with its dangerous possibility of enmeshing the superpowers, became all too apparent.

However distant and as yet only indirectly involving the U.S., the war between Israel and its Arab neighbors could hold greater peril for Americans

than *The School for Scandal* drama unreeling in Washington. Public reaction to the fighting was more solemn and subdued—and notably less partisan—than during the quick Israeli triumph of 1967, when even the most disinterested observer had to admire that small country's masterful military effort. This time fear and reluctance about involvement were far stronger. The so-far inconclusive struggle upset and troubled Israel's many American supporters, while Arab sympathizers were jubilant at the dramatic demonstration that Arab forces could fight effectively against their traditional nemesis (see THE WORLD).

The war inspired a feeling that the renewed killing would resolve nothing; yet there was little the U.S. could do to seek an end to the hostilities until the course of battle had become clearer. With deep concern, Jewish communities in the U.S. rallied to contribute cash to Israel more abundantly than ever: a national goal of \$150 million seemed certain to be reached. The fear of a big-power confrontation grew as the Soviets made pro-Arab noises and partly resup-

plied the Syrians and Egyptians, although Secretary of State Henry Kissinger coolly insisted that Moscow was still acting with responsible restraint.

Inevitably, the ignominious demise of Agnew, a politician whose career had thrived on the generation of divisive emotion, commanded the most immediate attention. He had defiantly proclaimed his innocence and assailed his Justice Department prosecutors as conspirators out to get him. Then he turned about with astounding suddenness to concede his guilt in one crime and to bargain for leniency. Pleading *nolo contendere* to a charge of income tax evasion in return for his freedom, he also avoided the ordeal of standing trial for a sordid series of more odious acts. As detailed in a rare disclosure of evidence by the Justice Department—evidence he still denies—he was accused of repeatedly soliciting bribes and accepting cash kickbacks for influencing the award of Government contracts, even while serving as Vice President.

**Wild Assertions.** Among Agnew's few consolations were President Nixon's appeal "for compassion" for the man he had twice personally selected to be his running mate and some grudging praise by editorialists for his placing the national interest above his own by resigning rather than waging a protracted legal battle (see THE PRESS).

His fall was personally sad, and graft—obviously and unfortunately—is by no means rare in American politics. But rare indeed was the betrayal of the public trust by one who had so harshly judged others—a betrayal carried, moreover, into the very precincts of the White House, according to the evidence presented against Agnew, with cash deliveries in the Vice President's Executive Office. All this made sympathy for Agnew a little difficult. Holding out for a Government pledge of no prison term was, in addition, hardly a selfless act. If his nation's interest had been Agnew's main concern, he could have resigned immediately, defended himself in court, and refrained from wild assertions of base motives behind his prosecution.

The Justice Department's willingness to allow Agnew to exact this leniency created wide controversy. Certainly, it was no shining example of equality under law. Many of the political radicals whom Agnew had condemned spent months in jail awaiting various conspiracy trials before being acquitted. The sidewalk mugger can spend years in prison for a \$50 robbery. Nonetheless, Attorney General Elliot Richardson and, implicitly, Richard Nixon probably served the larger public interest by getting Agnew out of office the quickest way possible.

In announcing the Agnew deal, Richardson claimed that the whole affair, however distressing, had shown

that the American system of government worked. Despite his lofty position, Agnew had been pursued and prosecuted by his own party's Administration. Indeed, the system had worked, although belatedly. For nearly five years a man morally and intellectually unfit for national leadership had been just one life removed from the Oval Office.

Leaks of progress in criminal investigations remain an ethical problem for both press and bar. Once again, as in the Watergate coverage, news stories denounced as false and malicious turned out to be responsible and true.

The Agnew debacle, as had the 1972 choice of Democratic Senator Thomas Eagleton, again raised questions about the way vice-presidential candidates are selected. Last week Historian Henry Steele Commager contended on television that the real problem is that a Vice President "serves no useful purpose" and thus the post should be abolished. He saw no way to make the job more important and found it unsurprising that the position so often goes to unimportant men—"people who are willing to be nothing on the gamble that they will be everything." He would prefer to work with the Presidential Succession Act, which allows other officials to take over for a deceased or disabled President.

Even if a Vice President's sole function is to be available for succession, he is a most significant official. There seem to be no genuine obstacles to each po-

litical party's setting up a less rushed timetable for the selection of its No. 2 standard-bearer, so as to permit a full study of the candidate's background and qualifications. But what may be most urgently needed is party insistence that its vice-presidential candidate meet more demanding standards. Although Gerald Ford is an experienced politician, he is not notably different from the uncontroversial, ticket-balancing type of candidate normally chosen in conventions. The Congress now has an opportunity, however, to set precedents in its examination of the nominee, perhaps developing rigorous methods and criteria for future party conventions to follow.

**Odd Atmosphere.** Overall, the week's events did little to enhance Nixon's prestige. Another of his hand-picked appointees had been shown to be fatally flawed. Nixon probably managed to avoid angering significant political segments by his selection of Ford, although the odd atmosphere of celebration rather than solemnity as he made his televised announcement may have offended many viewers. A battle with Congress over confirmation has surely been avoided. Nor is there likely to be any widespread feeling that the removal of Nixon would be much more palatable now that Agnew is gone, since Ford does not immediately conjure up an alternative of massive presidential stature.

Yet the speed with which Agnew fell and the apparent ease with which he

will be replaced make the removal of a high official seem less traumatic. This view was expressed by both the political left and right. Contended William Rusher, publisher of the conservative *National Review*: "We've demonstrated that we can replace a Vice President, so I expect we could replace a President." Argued Bill Moyers, a presidential press secretary under Lyndon Johnson: "The American people in the last ten years have become accustomed to the disposability of their officials." Although lessening, the general fear of impeachment and its global impact remains a protective force for the President.

But as the Agnew affair recedes, the court actions surrounding Watergate will bring that scandal back to center stage. Last week the grand jury directed by Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox returned its first indictment; there undoubtedly will be many more, with trials or guilty pleas to follow. The tapes decision of the appeals court—certainly a definitive one—will speedily move Nixon's case to the Supreme Court, carrying with it weighty judicial arguments against the President's position.

Before long, the Ervin committee will write its final report, with unknown consequences for the President. Agnew's departure, however spectacular, does not close the curtain on the Nixon Administration's painful drama, or that of the nation's, whose trust in its Government has been assaulted once again.

DAVID RUBINGER



SYRIAN COMMANDOS KILLED BY ISRAELI PARATROOPERS AFTER BATTLE IN THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

For Americans, too, the peril abroad was great, but Washington's scandals commanded immediate attention.