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Mr. Agnew 'Shows the Flag'

In recent decades Vice Presidential travel abroad has often been the diplomatic equivalent of "showing the flag." It has served to reassert American interest in a threatened area or to reassure client states at a nervous moment. But sometimes its purposes have been much more political than diplomatic.

Spiro Agnew's six-day caravan through Asia to re-explain the Nixon Doctrine conformed to this pattern. It may have done more to confuse than to clarify American intentions in the Far East, but it did launch the Vice President on this fall's electioneering in a cloud of headlines, all designed to lend a patina of authenticity to the evidences of Administration "success." Mr. Agnew went to Asia to find.

In Seoul, hours of "hard bargaining" between the Vice President and President Park of South Korea failed to produce a communiqué on the linkage between American funds for modernization of the Korean Army and the withdrawal of American troops. Mr. Agnew's own statement that plans to withdraw 20,000 troops this year represented only a first step toward withdrawal of all 64,000 American troops in, perhaps, five years brought a White House disclaimer. "At this time there are no plans or intentions to draw down additional forces," said a Presidential spokesman.

Only a few days before the Agnew trip began, a high White House official said a careful study had convinced the Administration that a modernized South Korean Army, backed up by the United States forces left after the planned withdrawal of 20,000 men, would be capable of repelling any threat short of a full-scale joint assault by North Korea and Communist China. The American message to South Korea, as defined by this White House official, was that removing the 20,000 Americans now would make it easier to induce Congress to keep the remaining American troops in Korea. All that was left of that message after the Agnew visit was a smoke bank.

The smoke was just as thick over Cambodia as the Vice President explained and re-explained what Administration policy was in that battleground. His initial statement that it would be "impossible" to withdraw all American combat forces from Vietnam if the Lon Nol Government fell to the Communists underwent dilution after dilution. In the end, Mr. Agnew explained that what he meant all along was the timetables for Vietnam withdrawal "might not be as ambitious" as the Administration would like if the Communists prevailed in Cambodia.

Now that the Vice President is on his way home, the White House professes pleasure at his performance abroad. That gratification may be based on something more than is currently in the record. Otherwise, the diplomatic dividends seem decidedly marginal, as against those connected with Mr. Agnew's stumping for Republican candidates this fall.