

James Reston

Agnew Is Building A Wider Political Base

Minneapolis

VICE PRESIDENT Spiro Agnew has been out here on the road quoting Arthur Schlesinger, of all people, and saying some very sensible things to the Minneapolis Press Association, and this not only indicates a change in the tone of his public speeches, but suggests that he is trying to build a much wider political base.

His theme to the editors was that they should not be so jumpy when criticized by some official in Washington. One or two speeches critical of newsmen, he said, didn't mean that the administration was engaged in a conspiracy against the reporters or planning to dismantle the First Amendment.

Agnew conceded that Schlesinger is not his favorite historian, but quoted him as saying that the Kennedy administration "used to wonder about the hypersensitivity of reporters."

"When editorial and administration opinions differ," the vice president observed, "why cannot the differences be accepted as sincere judgments on both sides? . . . The fact is," he added, "that the Nixon administration is no more desirous of, nor more capable of, curtailing freedom of the press in America than any of its predecessors."

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IT IS INTERESTING that Agnew is now speaking in such moderate tones. Nevertheless, he has obviously studied the election returns, and noted that candidates who depend on small but ardent blocs of voters at one extreme of the American electorate don't get very far in American politics. It is clearly going to be Spiro Agnew's task, not only to hold onto his base on the right but win acceptance in the middle if he is to win his party's nomination in 1976.

This is not to say that the vice president is changing his tone solely for selfish political reasons. He did not come to politics as a man of the right. His record



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as governor of Maryland was one of moderation and, in part, of liberal innovation, and he started the 1968 presidential election campaign, not as a supporter of Richard Nixon, but as a backer of Nelson Rockefeller.

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IN MR. NIXON'S first term, when the President felt that the criticism of the newsmen and commentators on Vietnam was beginning to turn the country against the administration and impair the President's credibility, Agnew was given the assignment of leading counterattacks on the newspapers and the networks.

In fairness to the vice president, however, even when he was leading the political charge against the wicked scribbler, he never personalized the battle, was always available to the men he attacked, and unlike some of his colleagues in this administration, never impressed those of us who argued with him that he was a zealot who was out to weaken the fundamental liberties of press and television.

In short, he was given an assignment by the President, and he carried it out, but he has restored the balance he wanted, and he now has a new problem. It is to move into the center, as Mr. Nixon moved away from the right, and to put himself in a position to lead "the new Republican majority."

In a way he is probably more comfortable with his new moderate scenes than he was with his alliterative attacks and provocations on the newsmen a year or so ago.

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ACCORDINGLY, he is now at the point in his career where Mr. Nixon was before the 1968 campaign, when men seeking office talk more sense than they do after they get in.

One recalls with some nostalgia the comment of Richard Nixon before he got into the White House:

"The president has a duty to decide," he said, "but the people have a right to know why. The president has a responsibility to tell them—to lay out all the facts, and to explain not only why he chose as he did but also what it means for the future. Only through an open, candid dialogue with the people can the president maintain his trust and his leadership. . . ."

"We should bring dissenters into policy discussions, not freeze them out; we should invite constructive criticism, not only because the critics have a right to be heard, but also because they often have something worth hearing . . . The president cannot isolate himself from the great intellectual ferment of his time. On the contrary, he must consciously and deliberately place himself at their center. . . ."

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