

Verbal Posturing, Mr. Agnew?

At first glance, Vice President Agnew's demand that Joseph Rhodes Jr. resign from the President's Commission on Campus Unrest because he has engaged in "verbal posturing" looks like deliberate parody. Mr. Agnew would seem to have a personal stake in not making verbal posturing an offense that disqualifies one from public office.

But the far from comic overtones of the Vice President's attack on Mr. Rhodes's undiplomatic but patently sincere statements offer new evidence of a dismal misunderstanding of the factors that divide the campuses from the Administration.

Mr. Rhodes said bluntly that he felt the commission will have to determine whether those who fired the shots that killed six students at Kent State and Jackson were influenced by Administration statements and policies.

Far from being an unreasonable question, it is one that has been asked repeatedly by responsible observers. It was recently put to Mr. Agnew himself by a delegation of distinguished professors. At the time, the Vice President was reported to have said that these critics of his provocative oratory on campus dissent may have had a point.

Still, the basic issues continue to elude him. It is that an honest rapprochement between the Administration and disaffected youths remains impossible so long as the President and his advisers think of the problem largely in terms of a superficial face-lifting of the Administration's image. The real issues are war and peace, social justice and racial equality. The students are certainly unwilling to accept political strategies that rely on thinly disguised appeals to the instincts of prejudice and fear.

The new commission was from its inception charged with a redundant investigation to uncover known facts. Its superfluous mission would become downright dangerous if it turned to whitewashing a serious situation. Mr. Rhodes's strongly held views, along with his dedication to nonviolence, offer some assurance that the White House does not wish to equip the panel with the kind of muffler which Mr. Agnew recommends for others.