

## Topics: On Dividing the Country

By SPIRO T. AGNEW

More and more frequently, the charge is being made that, because of the actions and attitudes of the Vice President, the Nixon Administration is "dividing the country."

Is it possible for a country of over 205 million free individuals to be united on the issues of our time? Obviously not. Progress in our governmental system grows out of the clash of partisan positions.

Look at democracy objectively. How does an aspirant for office oust an incumbent? By selling himself and his ideas? To a degree, yes; but that is seldom enough. He must attack the policies of his opponent; as he does, people will side with one candidate or the other. Divisive? Of course—but by dividing, we conquer apathy.

Examine for a moment the free enterprise system. A better product or service is not sufficient to insure success. It must be marketed and, above all, advertised. Nearly all advertising is an implied rejection of the alternatives offered by the competition. In its way it divides the consumer community.

So we see that in government and in business we stimulate constructive division. And traditionally our educational and religious patterns also have been compatible with the partisanship of ideas.

Before leveling charges of "divisiveness" at one another, we would do well to differentiate between the kind of di-

vision that embitters and negates, and the division that encourages intelligent debate. A House divided against itself cannot stand, but a House that can agree to divide on ideas and issues stands secure and healthy.

It is my thesis that we can divide over ideas without the handwringing that some Americans express today over such disagreements. Ideas are flexible—they are malleable and readily modified under the hammer of new knowledge. They are not held forever like heirlooms. And as they change, the lines of division among us change—ally becomes antagonist, antagonist becomes ally. We, therefore, need not fear divisions born of different ideas.

In this sense, dissent is divisive—and there is nothing wrong about that. The dissent most under discussion these days separates the protesters from the establishment and is therefore divisive. I find it difficult to understand why those who properly defend the right to dissent at the same time condemn a strong defense by the establishment just because it criticizes the dissenters' position.

### Unity, Not Unanimity

But if one is to accept my argument that a people divided over ideas is natural, and possibly stimulating to progress, in what sense should our people be brought together for the promotion of civil tranquility? The answer, as I see it, is this: We should seek to come together in a peaceful, rational

forum. The object of this coming together is not unanimity. The object is progress. It is achieved by unity based on constructive compromise.

Unity should be based on the freedoms which permit the tough, impartial examination of ideas—ideas that can then be accepted on their merits or rejected. But unity is perverted into a divisive slogan when it is used to create artificial groupings such as "the young," "the poor," and "the black." These are stereotypes that do not exist.

### Stereotyped Opinions

Do all young, or all poor, or all black people have a persisting identity of interest? I think not. Such an assumption demeans each group because it condescendingly overlooks variances of opinion among the individuals who comprise each group. It implies that the natural divisions which occur because all young people do not have the same ideas, or all black people do not reach the same conclusions, or all poor people do not see a common escape from poverty, are unimportant and must be subverted to a uniform set of standards for that particular group. The amazing thing is that these standards are promulgated by people outside the group who are often old, white and fairly well-to-do. Those who stereotype the opinions of groups see America as a mosaic made up of hostile minorities, each of which they encourage to demand, "What's in it for me?" And I think you

will agree that it never seems to be enough.

The divisions that are dangerous are divisions that set young against old, black against white, poor against rich. These are not divisions based on conviction and disagreement over ideas. These are divisions encouraging prejudice and rejecting the productive examination of ideas which are actually shared in many cases by the groups set against one another.

The encouragement of these coldly exclusive alignments does a disservice to our free system because it separates people on the basis of what they are rather than what they think. Tomorrow, the old cannot be young, the white cannot be black, and few of the rich will be poor. That leaves a rather dubious basis for compatibility. But tomorrow, the air can be pure, the slums can be gone, and the world can be at peace. It can happen only through the combined efforts of young and old, black and white, rich and poor.

We will never come together on our common purposes of equal opportunity, individual freedom and social justice by insisting that there is only one road to these goals—and smothering debate by falsely evoking an ideal of unity.

Division and dissent, even traveling under the pejorative label of "divisiveness," can be constructive forces for orderly change, and I for one intend to defend the principle as I take part in the process.

Spiro T. Agnew is Vice President of the United States.