

The New Corruption

Vice President Agnew has been unusually quiet in recent weeks. But he may not merely be resting from his arduous political campaign efforts. If the reports and speculations emanating from Washington are correct, the nation is about to see a "new Agnew."

In place of trips to Asia where he made bellicose, anti-Communist speeches, the Vice President is said to be planning to journey in the Spring to Europe where he can talk about foreign trade, the environment, and other peaceful, constructive subjects. In place of hard-hitting attacks against "radic-libs," rebellious students, and the media, the Vice President is to tour the country on behalf of federal-state revenue sharing and emerge as the champion of the hard-pressed cities.

The purpose of these new activities would be not primarily to put Mr. Agnew's talents and energies to better use but to remake his image with an eye to the 1972 election. Only if he has a less controversial and more conciliatory reputation, it is thought, can he be an asset to the Republican ticket next year.

Like other projects in the nebulous realm of public relations, this image-making venture may come to nothing. Mr. Agnew may simply rebel since in his earthy, extemporaneous remarks—as distinguished from his carefully crafted alliterations—he has shown himself to be a man with a mind of his own. But the very fact that he and other public figures can be seriously discussed in these terms reflects something fundamentally wrong with American political practice.

There is a widespread acceptance of the degrading notion that a politician can achieve success by manufacturing and manipulating his own reputation. It is not the reality that counts; it is the image. If a candidate can spend enough money, can hire the right ghostwriters and television advisers, and can control the format of his public appearances, then he can invent a winning public personality for himself.

Linked to this manufacturing of images is the blatantly opportunistic conviction that the same man can have several public personalities and project whichever one suits his needs. Thus, a Vice President can grind through a fiercely negative campaign stressing themes of fear and anger, and then shift smoothly into a statesmanlike gear and go humming along in an entirely different mode.

Too many are content to comment upon these astonishing changes of emphasis and content as if they were drama critics rating an actor's performance. But what of a politician's integrity, his wholeness as a human being? Men who seek the highest offices where they may exercise life-or-death powers have no right to conduct themselves with anything but the highest seriousness.

Every politician, indeed probably every human being, tries to present himself in the best light. That is not at issue. What is of concern is the growing dependence upon various contrivances, evasions, and manipulations which go by the name of image-making. This is a vulgar, cynical, and fraudulent attempt to present public men as something other than what they are or to present them in several radically inconsistent guises. It is a new corruption and, like old forms of corruption, it requires exposure and condemnation if self-government is to flourish.