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The Perils Of an Isolated Vice President

In his interview with Dan Rather on CBS the other evening, Sen. Barry Goldwater remarked that he thought that most of Richard Nixon's troubles over the years have come from the fact that he was a "loner," a man who had almost never been able to "let his hair down" and share in the camaraderie on which most politicians thrive.

Goldwater suggested—and the evidence certainly supports him—that this character trait made Mr. Nixon an easy victim, or even an accomplice, of a White House staff system that isolated him from much of what was happening in the country and the government. One price for this isolation—by the President's own statement—was the concealment of the truth of Watergate, with the fearful consequences it is now having for the administration.

Yet in that same interview, Goldwater spoke with seeming nonchalance about the possible succession of Vice President Agnew—a man who seems, to many observers, an even more isolated figure than the President. Goldwater said he expected Agnew to be the next Republican candidate for the White House and said that if Watergate snagged the President, the "quickest way" out for the country would be for Mr. Nixon to resign "and put Agnew in and get going."

Goldwater noted, as have many others, that Agnew is clearly free of the taint of Watergate, because no one with the slightest acquaintance with his status in the administration believes him enough of an "insider" to have been part of the cabal.

This degree of innocence is as alarming as it is genuine, for it bespeaks an isolation far more complete than that which landed Mr. Nixon in so much trouble. The fact is that Spiro Agnew, the man who sits a heartbeat or a forced resignation away from the presidency, lives today in a no-man's-land that is unhealthy for him and for the country.

The Vice President's office is an uncomfortable anteroom off the corridors of power, no matter who the occupant. No man of talent—and Agnew does have talents—has felt anything but uncomfortable there.

But election to the vice presidency has not been—and should not be—the sentence to solitary confinement that Richard Nixon has imposed on Agnew.

Harry Truman was hobnobbing with his pals in Sam Rayburn's Capitol hideaway when the phone call came summoning him to the presidency, and he was back on Capitol Hill the next day to seek help from his congressional chums in his new task.

When fate made Lyndon Johnson President, he had a quarter-century's accumulation of Washington know-how on which to draw, and a vast number of political friends.

By contrast, Agnew in Washington appears a stranger in a world he never made—alone, except for a small staff and a small circle of Maryland friends.

Unlike all the other modern Vice Presidents, he has no big backlog of governmental experience. He had been only 18 months in his first major office, the Maryland governorship, when Mr. Nixon chose him for Vice President and lifted him into his role of exalted emptiness. He has been given no substantive work in the administration—not even in the area of federal-state relations or the oversight of the New Federalism programs, which he probably understands better than anyone around Mr. Nixon.

His efforts in his first year as presiding officer of the Senate to become the administration's ambassador to Capitol Hill were awkward and unsuccessful. He has been cold-shouldered by the Republicans there, and rarely makes even a token appearance at the Capitol any longer.

The one group of politicians with whom Agnew appears to feel at home are the governors—whose annual conferences he still visits. At the last one, earlier this month, however, he sat mute during an important discussion of the New Federalism programs, silenced, his aides said, by his feeling that he should not displace the White House and Cabinet aides the President had designated as his spokesmen.

There is something that seems very wrong about the spectacle of the elected Vice President of the United States being a silent spectator while a 32-year-old White House staff man expounds the administration's views to the Governors. And there is something unhealthy about his acceptance of that status of solitary confinement.

Agnew needs to break out of his shell and become something more than a traveling speechmaker—for his own good and the country's good. Whatever their personal qualms and their potential 1976 rivalries, Republicans on Capitol Hill and in the state houses—and Democrats, too—ought to go out of their way to make him part of their dialogue.

Most of all, Mr. Nixon, who put him in line of succession, has clear responsibility to allow and encourage Agnew to develop the variety of social and political associations anyone who might be President needs. If there really is to be a "new openness" in the administration, it should be demonstrated by opening the cell door and letting Agnew out.