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Agnew's Troubles-- Double or Nothing

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SPIRO AGNEW'S troubles impart a double-or-nothing character to the outcome of Watergate. For if the Vice President survives, he will provide almost iron-clad insurance against pressures to force President Nixon from office.

But if Agnew is found seriously culpable, Mr. Nixon's troubles will be greatly intensified. There will be set in motion a procedure apt to end in the ouster of both men.

Contrary to widespread impression, the investigation into Agnew's case is still at an early stage. Witnesses have not yet been sworn and records have not yet been fully examined. Something like a month will probably have to go by before there is a determination one way or another on the case of the Vice President.

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ALREADY, however, it is clear that the case against Agnew is grave. From the U.S. attorney, George Beall, to the Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, those responsible for the prosecution are serious men, well known for support of the Nixon Administration, and with no axe to grind against the Vice President. Yet they felt the allegations against Agnew warranted a formal notification, and a very tough letter requesting extensive personal records.

Moreover, the response by the rest of the administration has hardly been reassuring. The President has not come personally to the defense of his Vice President. Agnew's first response — an affirmation of faith in the system of criminal justice — read like the confession of a

man who hoped to get off easy. His second response — the press conference of last week — was tough in manner but very cagy on points of law.

For example, Agnew asked for time to consider whether executive privilege might forbid his handing over documents to the prosecution. But if the charges really were "damned lies," as he said, his interest would be to waive the privilege at once in order to surface the records that prove his innocence.

The most Agnew can hope for, accordingly, is to avoid indictment because of lack of proof. Even in that case some sleazy associations and dubious past practices are bound to become widely known. At best, in other words, the Vice President will emerge bloodied and bowed.

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BUT A TARNISHED Agnew still in place is Mr. Nixon's best possible defense against Watergate. For if it becomes clear that forcing Mr. Nixon out meant bringing Agnew into the White House, almost everybody, and especially the Democrats, would draw back from pressing Watergate to the hilt against the President.

The converse works, if the case against Agnew develops into an indictment or some other clear showing of illegal activities. A finding against Agnew would add cogency to the Watergate revelations.

It would reinforce the impression of a President surrounded by men of no distinction who regularly used dishonest tactics and consistently lied on the most serious subjects.