

Agnew and His Press Critics

By James Reston
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Among the few certainties in this uncertain age is Vice President Spiro Agnew. Somehow he vanishes during the week, but almost always he shows up at the weekend somewhere, shaking his fist at the press and trying to divert everybody's attention from the war and the economy to the scoundrels in the universities and press.

He is by all odds the best public speaker and most colorful character in this Administration. He knows how to pick friendly audiences and unpopular targets and he is a sensation on the Republican chicken-dinner circuit, but he is beginning to sound like a stuck whistle, and busy as he is, he cannot quite keep up with the torrent of facts from the battlefield.

The other day when he

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spoke in Texas, the military command in Saigon announced the latest weekly casualty toll — 217 more Americans killed, 1281 wounded. This brings the total American dead in this war to 42,118, and no amount of political pollution will cover up these ghastly facts.

What will have been achieved when all this senseless killing is over? How are the South Vietnamese going to keep the enemy out of the Cambodian sanctuaries when they can't keep them out of Saigon?

A year from now, after 52 more weekly casualty lists, how will Indochina be more secure with 150,000 fewer American soldiers?

These are the questions Agnew doesn't answer and they will not go away by blaming the press for asking

them.

The Vice President is worried about the rise of isolationist sentiment in the United States, and well he might be, but again he cannot blame this on critics in the Senate or the press.

The cause of the new isolationism is the war, and the longer it goes on, cutting and dividing this nation to the heart, the harder it will be to get public support for American intervention even in areas more vital to America than Southeast Asia.

These are not frivolous issues raised by irresponsible newspapers to embarrass the President or cadge circulation. They were raised with President Johnson and, when he had no answer, drove him out of office.

There is still an honest and fundamental conflict here about how best to serve the nation. That is what it is all about. Agnew is right that personal attacks only make things worse, though he doesn't follow the principle

himself, but watchful criticism of presidential power to make and expand wars at will has never been more essential than it is now.

It would be hard to overestimate the influence of two inventions on the American press — the aerial bomb and the missile. They gave the President a power unprecedented in the history of nations, and tipped the balance in the American Federal system away from Congress, for the nation could be destroyed before Congress could even meet to debate a declaration of war.

All the more important, however, that the President's power and even his personality be observed with relentless and unrelenting attention.

It is true, as the Vice President said in Texas, that the press was strident after the sudden Cambodian landing. The thought that the President could invade a sovereign country without even consult-

ing Congress or key members of his own Cabinet sent a shudder through every inky wretch who ever read the attention.

So there is a difference with the Vice President, and vive la difference! We are not going to agree with him about Indochina, and he is wrong in thinking we want him to shut up and go away.

He helps us dramatize the sad misunderstandings of our time. Without him and Martha Mitchell, this would be the dozing capital of the world. But we ought to be able to agree about how to disagree and this the Vice President won't allow.

Understand his critics. He knows we are unpopular and wants to use us as a political devel, and in election terms he may be right.

But in the larger terms of America today is not that it is too strong, as he pretends, but that it is too weak, given the power of the President to make war as he likes.