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**GOP Left Speechless
By Agnew Headlines**

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To the embattled Nixon administration and Republican Party, yesterday's headlines of a criminal investigation of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew were something they needed like the proverbial hole in the head.

"It certainly doesn't help," said one White House aide who has been close to the Vice President. And then he added: "I just don't want to get into it."

Neither did anyone else in the administration or GOP leadership circle. Deputy White House press secretary Gerald L. Warren responded to a barrage of questions with the litany that he would have no comment on

Agnew's formal statement that he was "confident my innocence will be affirmed."

Republican National Chairman George Bush "does not want to comment now," an aide said. Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton, a fellow-Marylander who twice nominated Agnew for Vice President, was reported traveling and "unavailable for comment."

Senate and House press galleries received not a single press release on Agnew from vacationing members, who normally are eager to fill the news vacuum with a mimeographed handout on any item in the news.

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"After the Watergate experience," said one Republican campaign official who was asked about the puzzling silence by Agnew's partisans, "no one is eager to be the first to rush into print with a denial."

But the private comment of Republican leaders reflected deep concern and gloom. "Another bombshell," said a major New York Nixon backer. "A stunner," a conservative movement leader called it.

"I would like just one morning to pick up my paper and read some good news from Washington," said a Western state Republican chairman.

And a GOP functionary in Washington summed it up by saying: "The damn thing just keeps growing. That's the incredible thing. Every time you think there's nothing more that could possibly happen, we get hit with something new."

Democrats, well aware of the psychological and political toll on their opposition, maintained silence for reasons of their own. The Democratic National Committee formally declined to comment, but an official of that body, grinning broadly, told a reporter: "Why should we comment? This is not a partisan matter."

With few politicians knowing what lay behind the announcement that federal prosecutors in Baltimore had informed Agnew that he was under investigation for possible bribery, conspiracy and tax law violations in connection with an alleged kickback scheme, there was an understandable reluctance to prejudice the impact of the news.

But the private comments of men in both parties emphasized three themes:

- The additional burden on a party and administration already defensive over Watergate scandals.

- The inevitable damage—whether temporary or permanent, as future events will determine—to Agnew's own prospects for succeeding to the presidency.

- The added uncertainty in the 1976 Republican presidential nomination race.

News of the Agnew investigation broke just as some Republicans—including party chairman Bush—were beginning to convince themselves that the worst of the Watergate damage was behind them. With the Senate hearings about to recess and the President preparing his long-delayed rebuttal statement, at least some White House and party officials had begun to say the time for a counter-offensive was at hand.

Agnew had been expected to play an important supporting role in that move, but now he is confronted with problems of his own that may immobilize him politically for an indefinite period.

One of the first dates on Agnew's schedule is an appearance Aug. 18 at a rally for the Republican candidate in a special congressional election on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Ross Whealton, manager of State Sen. Robert Bauman's (R) campaign, said yesterday that as far as he

knew, Agnew would still be there. "Why shouldn't he?" Whealton asked.

But a party official in Washington said he expected Agnew "to keep a low profile" until the charges are disposed of, adding that "Bauman is running uphill against Watergate as it is."

Among conservative Republicans, who have been Agnew's strongest boosters, the shock of the news was commensurately great.

"Many of us had long ago gotten used to the idea that Nixon was not what he seemed," said one veteran conservative operative, "but that's hard to accept about Agnew."

He went on: "We've always thought of him as our Mr. Clean. He disproved those charges. The New York Times threw against him in 1968, and no one ever hinted that he had any involvement in the Watergate mess. And now, this."

Because rugged integrity and independence have been so central to the national following Agnew has developed over the past five years, most Republicans said yesterday they felt there was almost certain to be some political damage even from the unproved accusations publicized yesterday.

A West Coast Republican, reporting that the story got "big play" in his state, predicted that it "will derail the Agnew presidential express."

"Regardless of how it comes out, just the fact that the story gets such big play, in the context of Watergate, has to have a negative impact," he said.

Two conservative leaders suggested in separate interviews that if Agnew's support wanes in coming weeks, the likeliest gainers would be California Gov. Ronald Reagan and former Texas Gov. John B. Connally.

Reagan, interestingly, was one of the few prominent Republicans to speak up on Agnew's behalf yesterday. "I have known Ted Agnew to be an honest and honorable man," Reagan said. "He, like any other citizen of high character, should be considered innocent until proven otherwise."

Major conservative spokesmen have been saying for months that they would delay their decision on which of the three leading conservative hopefuls—Agnew, Connally and Reagan—they would support for the nomination until the staying power of each man has been thoroughly tested.

But a long-time strategist for that wing of the party remarked yesterday that "We damn sure want to have a horse who will get us to the convention. Some of us were uncertain before this, whether Agnew really had what it takes to go for the top job. This certainly doesn't come as any reassurance."

Among moderate and progressive Republicans willing to comment yesterday, the view was that any damage to Agnew would simply make the 1976 race more wide open than before.

"As long as he was clean of the Watergate scandal," said one campaign consultant, "you had to consider he had the inside track for the nomination. If he has a scandal of his own he can't shake, then there is no front-runner."

Another GOP official said, "The more talk there is of scandal, the more it enhances the people who are outsiders to the current administration." He mentioned Reagan, New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller, and Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.) as "outsiders" who could benefit from the situation.

Others added the names of Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.), the television hero of the Watergate hearings, and such dark horses as Washington Gov. Daniel J. Evans and Michigan Gov. William Milliken.

"The political future of the country is wide open," said a second campaign consultant who has many GOP clients. "There is incredible uncertainty in everyone's mind about who or what may be damaged next. There's a strong attraction to anyone who wasn't in the political business before. Percy and Baker are all fresh and new now, but there will probably be even fresher faces than theirs by the time we get to 1976."

One possibility mentioned by a few politicians yesterday could scramble the 1976 picture totally. If Agnew should be forced to resign, President Nixon, under the never-used 25th Amendment, would have the authority to nominate a successor to Agnew as Vice President.

His choice would require confirmation by both the House and the Senate, which could put the Democrats in the position of deciding whether to ratify Mr. Nixon's selection of the man who would have the inside track on the 1976 Republican nomination.