

# Agnew's Rise: From 'Spiro

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Five years ago today, when Richard M. Nixon made his surprise choice of a running mate and the 1968 Republican National Convention reverberated with cries of "Spiro Who?" there was ample reason.

Spiro Theodore Agnew, then the 49-year-old freshman governor of Maryland, had appeared on the national political scene like a sleek, well-dressed genie out of a bottle.

Among the political cognoscenti, he was known—but barely—as a kind of maverick who had been waging a one-man campaign to draft Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York for President, then suddenly switched to Richard Nixon. To the world at large, he was a nobody.

When Agnew told a Miami Beach press conference that day that Spiro Agnew "is not a household name," no one could quarrel with him. "I certainly hope that it will become one within the next couple of months," he added.

That, of course, was a hope soon fulfilled. But the new-found Agnew prominence grew not from a greater public awareness of who the man had been, but of who he was to become—first as 1968 candidate, then as Vice President and spokesman of Middle America. The fact was that before he had become governor less than two years earlier, he had not been much.

The Spiro Agnew who was introduced to the national electorate by Richard Nixon in 1968 was a political phenomenon. Unlike those public figures who had toiled in Congress, or in a major statehouse, or in high national party councils for years, waiting to be elevated, Ted Agnew was an overnight flash.

Only 11 years earlier, he had been an appointed member of a Baltimore County zoning appeals board, at a salary of \$3,600 a year. A native of Baltimore City, born but two blocks from the

state office building where as governor he later labored, he went to P.S. 69 and Garrison Junior High School in the Forest Park section.

One of his sixth-grade classmates, Bud Hammerman, and young Agnew worked together delivering groceries from local markets in their wagons, for 10 or 15 cents a trip, and delivered circulars for a hardware store.

Hammerman later became a successful Baltimore County real estate and banking man and an Agnew fund-raiser. He is the same I. H. (Bud) Hammerman who, according to reliable sources, is now under federal investigation along with Agnew for possible violation of bribery, conspiracy and tax laws in connection with an alleged kickback scheme.

After high school and an uninspired bout with chemistry courses at Johns Hopkins University, Agnew dropped out, took a daytime clerk's job and attended the University of Baltimore law school at night. In World War II, he was an army company commander in Belgium and Germany and afterward an assistant personnel manager in a supermarket and later a lawyer of mixed success.

By this time he had moved out of the city into suburbia, near Towson, the Baltimore County seat, where he had his office. It was there, in a period of developmental boom, that Agnew got his first real taste of the emoluments of public office, and demonstrated his first appetite for politics.

Until 1946, Agnew had been a Democrat. A mentor in the law, county Judge Lester Barrett, led him into the Republican fold but it was not until the early 1950s that he became an active worker. As a volunteer for Rep. James P.S. Devereux, he directed a team of coeds in a curbside placard drill and also worked the PTA and Kiwanis circuit.

He helped pass a new charter for the county government in 1956 and was re-

warded with a one-year term on the county board of zoning appeals. "It was a prestige job for me at the time," Agnew said later. ". . . It was really a quasi-judicial position where we actually made the record in zoning cases and other appeals for the courts, and it was good for my law practice to have the prestige connected with this."

Agnew's handling of his duties earned him a reputation for honesty and application, and in 1958 he was appointed to a three-year term, becoming chairman the next month when the incumbent quit. Not satisfied with quasi-judicial tasks, he ran for county circuit judge in 1960—only eight years before becoming a vice-presidential candidate—and lost.

With three judgeships at stake, Agnew survived the Republican primary by running second out of three, but he finished dead last in a field of five in the general election. In the process, though, he ran vocally against a county tradition of returning incumbents and began to gain a reputation as a fighter.

In 1961, the Democrats won all seven county council seats and decided against renewing Agnew's term on the zoning appeals board. He made a crusade of it, won the backing of The Baltimore Sun, and although the council proceeded to dump him, the action further enhanced his reputation.

The chairman of the council at the time was Dale W. Anderson, and on the night of the vote he and Agnew engaged in a wild shouting match. This is the same Anderson who later succeeded Agnew as county executive and who is also a target of the federal grand jury investigation in Baltimore County that is taking a look at Agnew.

Brooks Bradley, a local funeral director and Democrat who voted for Agnew in the showdown, reported that he told Anderson much later: "You thought you were so

smart that night you denied Ted Agnew, but you made him Vice President of the United States."

The row made Agnew a kind of Mr. Republican in the county—a county in which there were precious few. Bolstered by this, he next thought of running for Congress. But another long-time Republican wanted to run and so Agnew was lured off with an offer to be the party's candidate for county executive.

At the time, it seemed hardly a credible catnip. More than a year from the next election, the chances of a Republican winning against an entrenched Democratic machine appeared remote. But Ted Agnew, only four years after appointment to a lowly county board, seized the chance.

Once again, fortune smiled on him. A split developed in Democratic ranks between Michael Birmingham, the old party boss who had stepped down, and Christian Kahl, his lieutenant who had replaced him as county executive. Birmingham wanted to come back, and he took on Kahl and beat him in the primary, but at a disastrous cost. Kahl backers either sat out the general election or went to Agnew, who all the while had been beating the PTA and Kiwanis Club bushes.

Agnew's campaign cast Birmingham as a machine hack. Referring to the bitter Democratic primary, he said mudslinging and character assassination "are often the tools employed by unqualified candidates to distract attention from their own inadequacies," and he warned that the voters were "beginning to see through inept candidates who hide behind smooth, well-heeled political machines and speak only through the glib utterances of their public relations staffs.

"Too often," said the man whose own special style of campaigning came to be known as Agnewism, "campaigns are based on the vilification of personalities

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or on catch phrases that divert public attention from the very real problems of the community."

In the end, Agnew won with more than 56 per cent of the vote. He was now the leader of the Republican Party as well as the chief executive officer in the state's largest county — and the highest-ranking Republican officeholder in the state.

Agnew came to office as county executive at a time of great social unrest. Civil rights activists were on the move, and in the spring of 1963 they launched a concerted drive to end racial segregation at the Gwynn Oak amusement park.

Agnew stood aloof through most of the stormy conflict, in which more than 400 demonstrators were arrested. But just as a human relations commission he had reluctantly appointed neared a settlement, he jumped in and settled it himself. Later he said there had been "no possibility of a settlement in that thing until I got in it." But the civil rights leaders didn't see it that way.

In this and other civil rights issues in the county, Agnew showed himself to be a man who did not like to be pushed. When, for example, his human relations commission chairman moved too fast too militantly, Agnew pressured him out. It was a characteristic that has marked the Agnew posture on civil rights throughout his public career.

For all this, however, Agnew won a reputation in the conservative county as somewhat of a liberal. For one thing, in 1964 Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama picked Maryland as a testing ground of border state support and ran well in the state's Democratic presidential primary. Agnew spoke out against him, and sounded liberal in the process.

In another fight—a losing one—he also came off as a liberal, though his liberal foes insisted he was not. He

championed an urban renewal bill, with the towns of Towson and Catonsville the major beneficiaries. But it was not the usual slum-clearance plan that would provide low-income housing; its foes said that rather it would be a boon for the construction and industrial development barons of suburbia.

Among ultraconservatives, Wallaceites and John Birch Society members, "urban renewal" of any kind means socialistic meddling, and they fought it vigorously. And so, in losing, Agnew became more liberal because of the opposition he had.

On the overriding civil rights question of his four-year tenure in Towson, however, Agnew held the conservative line. He resisted pleas for open housing, clinging instead to a doctrine of property rights, finally yielding only on non-discrimination in new housing, where nobody's previous property rights were involved.

But still he was perceived as a liberal — a perception that was vastly enhanced in 1964, when, faced with the likelihood of defeat for reelection as county executive against the reconciled Democrats, he decided to run for governor.

Once again a Democratic split worked in Agnew's favor. In a three-way primary race, the surprise winner was George P. Mahoney, an ultraconservative perennial who tapped the Wallaceite lode and won on the slogan: "Your Home Is Your Castle — Protect It!" Agnew suddenly was the savior of Maryland liberalism — the only man between Mahoney and the executive mansion.

The the course of that campaign, Agnew acknowledged that he and a group of friends had bought land near the shore of Chesapeake Bay, near the site of the second Bay Bridge, then approved by the General Assembly. Among the others in the deal were J. Walter Jones, a fellow director with

Agnew in the Chesapeake National Bank in Towson, and Lester Matz, a consulting engineer whose firm did work for Baltimore County. Both are also among those targeted in the current federal investigation. Agnew insisted his group had no knowledge of the bridge's location when they bought the land, but under pressure he sold his share. The remaining partners bought it.

Mahoney's extremism was Agnew's ticket to Annapolis. He called Mahoney's slogan "a veil of voodoo," tied him to the Ku Klux Klan and labeled him "a devil that sits holding a two-pronged pitchfork of bigotry and hatred." It worked. Agnew got 49.5 per cent of the vote in a three-man race over Mahoney and an independent, Hyman Pressman.

In Annapolis, Agnew was a tidy, deliberate administrator, rubbing the entrenched Democrats the wrong way by bringing in his own program experts, but winning points with a new tax reform bill in 1967 and launching a constitutional convention.

The new constitution was called "superb" by Agnew but the voters disagreed, rejecting it by 3-to-2 margin in May, 1968, in one of Agnew's major disappointments as governor.

The second year also brought other troubles. He proposed ambitious programs on mental health, water pollution, alcoholism, housing and highways. But he also promised there would be no tax increase for the last three years of his term, and the legislature entered a pitched battle with him over budget cuts.

In the state itself, too, there was turmoil. In July, 1967, Cambridge, Md., had burned and H. Rap Brown had fled, and on March 27, 1968, a boycott at Bowie State College started over campus conditions. A week later more than 200 of the college's students held a sit-in outside Agnew's Annapolis office in protest. Agnew

had them arrested and had the school closed down. What was left of Agnew's liberal image began to fade.

That same night, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Bowie State was quiet, but in Baltimore, anger smoldered into violence and in two nights the city was in flames, taking an eventual toll of six deaths, 700 persons injured and 5,000 arrested.

When Baltimore city police were adjudged not able to cope, nearly 500 state police were moved in amid looting and burning in the black ghettos. Mayor Thomas D'Alessandro, city and state police officials and the head of the Maryland National Guard recommended to Agnew that he send in the National Guard. From a riot command post in Annapolis, he issued the order.

On April 11, Agnew called in about 100 of Baltimore's most prominent and most moderate black community leaders, many of whom, accompanied by his law-enforcement, strode into the room and proceeded to read the black leaders the riot act, accusing them of knuckling under to black fomenters of violence. Most of the leaders walked out; and Agnew's liberal image slipped more, and a new image of toughness was replacing it.

Among those apprised of Agnew's actions toward Bowie State and the Baltimore black leaders was Richard M. Nixon. Patrick J. Buchanan, then a Nixon aide and later a White House speech writer and resident conservative, saw to it that his boss got clippings about Agnew's tough stances.

Knowing Agnew had broken with the indecisive Rockefeller, Nixon had already met with Agnew two days after the Bowie State boycott. The courtship was on, and Spiro T. Agnew was on his way to within a heartbeat of the presidency.