

Defending Self, Agnew Says

WXPost

AUG 9 1975

Vice President Proud to Be His Own Man

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The Vice President, as Spiro Agnew is fond of saying, is the President's man.

That has been true of Agnew without exception during his four and one-half years of faithful service to President Nixon, but it wasn't true yesterday.

Yesterday, Agnew was his own man and looked proud of it.

"I think the Vice President of the United States should stand on his own feet," Agnew said. "It really isn't that important what a President says, although I welcome the President's support... he has given me it, unequivocally. But I think the office of Vice President is an important enough one that the man has to stand on his own feet, so I'm not spending my time looking around to see who's supporting me. I'm defending myself."

Agnew undertook that defense with considerable skill and some fire before more than 100 reporters and a national television audience.

In contrast to the long presidential silence with which Mr. Nixon greeted damaging revelations of White House involvement in the Watergate case, the Vice President unhesitatingly addressed himself to the possible violations of bribery, tax fraud and extortion laws for which he is being investigated.

The press conference was his own idea, said Agnew, and the absence of any objection to it from the President was good enough for him. And he responded to a question about political effects of the charges with a reply that indicated he is far more concerned with his own reputation than with anything else.

"As you can well imagine, this is a singularly distressing situation for any public official to find himself in, regardless of how scurrilous or inaccurate such charges may be, and I've never enjoyed, I suppose, any kind of assault upon my integrity," Agnew said.

He added that he wasn't "really thinking" about running for President now but about "having my innocence affirmed in these matters."

Agnew's old-fashioned response to the charges against him provided a glimpse of the personal anguish about the investigation which must have gnawed at him ever since he first learned about it through "rumors on the cocktail party circuit" in February.

Later, in April, he retained counsel who met with the prosecutor and informed him that Agnew was concerned about rumors that he was attempting to impede the investigation.

"My counsel notified the prosecutor that such was not the case," Agnew said.

Agnew said he had informed the President of the rumors and of his actions through Alexander Haig, the now-civilian chief of staff whom Agnew always refers to as "Gen. Haig." When he received a hand-delivered letter Aug. 2 telling him that he was under investiga-

tion, the Vice President again told Mr. Nixon about it through Haig.

Five days elapsed before the President responded personally to Agnew in his time of trial.

The two men met privately yesterday for an hour and three-quarters in the Executive Office Building in a meeting that deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren said was not taped.

Agnew, in accordance with his usual practice, declined to report on his personal conversation with the President. But he left the room believing that he

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would have to conduct his defense on his own without any personal statements of defense from his embattled President.

"I have no expectation of such a statement," he said. "I would not solicit such a statement. I am certain from my conversation with the President in which he did express confidence in me, directly to me. That's all I need."

Agnew's confidence in the President's support of him was in marked contrast to the impression left at a morning news briefing in the White House by Warren, who said repeatedly that "the President's confidence in the Vice President is the same as it was before."

Warren persistently refused to answer questions about the previous extent of that confidence, and he left the impression that Mr. Nixon was giving only limited and grudging support to his Vice President.

But Agnew had already decided to embark on his own defense, discarding his original plan to remain silent and let the investigation run its course.

"Under normal circumstances, the traditional safeguard of secrecy of such proceedings would protect the subject," Agnew said in his brief opening statement to reporters yesterday. "But apparently this protection is not to be extended to the Vice President of the United States."

"Well, I have no intention to be skewered in this fashion. And since I have no intention to be so skewered, I called this press conference to label as false and malicious these rumors, these assertions and accusations that are being circulated..."

There was awareness both at the White House and in Agnew's office of the contrast in conduct between Mr. Nixon's response in the Watergate case and Agnew's answer to the Maryland investigation. The difference seemed to be that White House officials were uncomfortable about the contrast, while Agnew wasn't uncomfortable at all.

Asked why he was holding a press conference when the President hadn't held one, Agnew replied:

"The best answer I can give you to that is that President Nixon hasn't received a letter from the United States attorney telling him he's under investigation."

Agnew went on to cheer-

fully declare his own "absolutely total confidence" in Mr. Nixon and to say that the President's response in the Watergate case would be "entirely satisfactory." It was a far more vigorous display of confidence than any yet extended from the White House to Mr. Agnew.

Agnew appeared to be slightly nervous at the outset of the press conference on the fourth floor of the tightly guarded Executive Office Building. But he was completely in command throughout, responding to some questions with frank bluntness and to others with a trace of humor.

When one reporter asked a question about whether Agnew's "damned lies" remark extended to allegations or evidence against him, as well as to newspaper accounts, Agnew cut him off.

"I think you're making a great transference and jump, without giving me any specifics," Agnew said. "You know that I have said nothing that could be interpreted as even mildly critical of the news media for an awfully long time."

Nor would Agnew extend his denunciations to embrace the prosecutors in Baltimore.

"I don't even know these gentlemen, with the exception of the U.S. attorney, whom I know very casually," Agnew said. "And for me to suspect some kind of nefarious conduct on their part would be, I think, a little paranoid."

Agnew did not sound "a little paranoid" in any respect yesterday. He seemed concerned, candid, worried, resolute—and determined to prove that he is absolutely clean.

Two months ago, in his last well-publicized speech, the Vice President had denounced the Senate Select Watergate Committee for attempting to try its case "before the court of public opinion."

Yesterday, Agnew laid his own case before that self-same jury and acted as his own attorney in doing it. His first address to that jury was a ringing affirmation of innocence.