

Agnew Adopting Independent Role

By Lou Cannon

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Richard Nixon once called the vice presidency "a hollow shell—the most ill-conceived, poorly defined position in the American political system."

This is an accurate description of Spiro Theodore Agnew's role as it has evolved under Mr. Nixon's own presidency.

Until it was revealed last week that Agnew was under investigation for purportedly accepting kickbacks from Maryland contractors,

the Vice President had been steadily fading back into the household obscurity from which Mr. Nixon had rescued him in 1968.

But Agnew's practice of playing second violin in the White House orchestra ended last week on an abrupt, discordant note. After a 1¼-hour meeting with Mr. Nixon described by White House sources as "acrimonious," Agnew emerged firmly committed to an outspoken course of action that he knows may be contrasted to President Nixon's policy of silence and half-statements about Watergate.

In the new atmosphere of independence, Agnew aides and supporters now tell a story of repeated humiliations by the White House: telephone calls which H.R. Haldeman never bothered to return; domestic decisions which Agnew was "frozen out of" by John Ehrlichman; carefully arranged White House news leaks that undercut Agnew while he was abroad.

Last year Agnew was sub-

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Agnew's lawyers studying Nixon's position in executive privilege. Details, B1.

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jected to the embarrassment of what he considered well-launched trial balloons that John Connally would replace him as the Republican vice presidential nominee. And in the post-election reorganization carried out by Haldeman and Ehrlichman on instructions from the President the Vice President's staff was trimmed 10 per cent and Agnew was stripped of his liaison role with state and local governments.

Agnew made no secret that the intergovernmental role was the one he enjoyed most, and he publicly hinted that he hoped for a new intergovernmental mission after Ehrlichman left the government on April 30.

"Quite candidly, the President hasn't defined my role yet," Agnew said in an early May interview with *The Washington Post*.

That "definition" never came. Instead, Domestic Council Director Kenneth G. Cole continued as intergovernmental liaison. Agnew stayed away from governors' meetings and declined to meet with local lobbying groups in the belief it would appear he was trying to undercut Cole.

Some of Agnew's political supporters never understood why the Vice President cared about the relatively unglamorous liaison job. But one who knows Agnew explains it in terms of his background as county executive and governor.

"He was the first Vice President in many decades who wasn't Capitol Hill-oriented," explains this Agnew adviser. "He organized his office like it was an administrator's office, not a legislative office. He has never been even a state legislator. His friends in government were governors and county officials."

Because of his nonlegislative background, Agnew's isolation in the vice presidency was thus in one sense more complete than the isolation of his immediate predecessors.

Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey could at least complain to old congressional cronies if they felt they were being slighted by their Presidents. When Agnew lost his intergovernmental job, he also lost his chance to mix with public officials who understand problems from his own perspective.

"It's an intellectual frustration for a man who's spent his time in executive government making decisions to suddenly find that he cannot make decisions any more, that he can only recommend that they be made," Agnew said in that May interview.

Insignificant Office

In other respects, however, Agnew's frustrations have been those experienced by virtually every inhabitant of the office since John Adams, the first Vice President.

"The most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived," is the way that Adams described the vice presidency.

"His position is one of anomalous insignificance and curious uncertainty," wrote Woodrow Wilson in his doctoral thesis. "The chief embarrassment in discussing his office is that in explaining how little there is to be said about it, one has evidently said all there is to say."

For millions of Americans the vice presidency has been personified by Alexander Throttlebottom of "Of Thee I Sing," who couldn't get a library card because he needed two references.

Throttlebottom has haunted modern vice presidents. Even Richard Nixon, who did more with the office than his predecessors, was embarrassed in 1960 when President Eisenhower told a news conference that Mr. Nixon had never participated in White House "decisions."

A reporter followed up this statement by saying, "We understand that the power of decision is yours, Mr. President. I just wondered if you could give us an example of a major idea of his (Nixon's) that you had adopted..."

Private Complaints

"If you give me a week, I might think of one," President Eisenhower replied. "I don't remember."

Mr. Eisenhower's humiliation of his Vice President was unusual only in that it was public and apparently unintentional.

Both Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey complained privately of thoughtless and inconsiderate treatment while publicly proclaiming their loyalty to their Presidents.

In Albert Eisele's book, "Almost to the Presidency," former Under Secretary of State George Ball is quoted as describing how Humphrey was gradually excluded from meetings on Vietnam.

"I think the President felt that if the Vice President was going to raise any arguments, he didn't want him around," Ball said. "He treated him pretty much the way the Kennedys treated him when he was Vice President. I would have thought that Johnson, having been through this miserable experience himself and being excluded from most things, would have leaned over backwards to treat Humphrey differently, but he didn't. It reminded me of the old system of hazing a college freshman."

Agnew also underwent the vice presidential equivalent of hazing. "I did not become Vice President with Lyndon Johnson to cause him trouble," Humphrey said in 1965. "The Vice President is the President's man and not a competing political entity," Agnew said in 1972.

So Agnew, like Humphrey before him, has responded with unremitting declarations of loyalty to his chief. Until last week.

Then, in response to a criminal investigation that he feels could break his political career or make it, Agnew held a press conference. And his view of the relationship between the President and the Vice President sounded like a personal declaration of independence.

"I think a Vice President should stand on his own two feet," Agnew said. "It really isn't important what a President says, although I welcome the President's support..."

Meeting Was Heated

From the reports filtering out of the White House in the aftermath of the historic and private Tuesday meeting between Mr. Nixon and Agnew, the President had

plenty to say and not much of it was complimentary.

Agnew insists that he had warned the President months ago of "rumors" that he might be indicted on tax fraud, bribery and conspiracy charges. Privately, according to some reports, Agnew also tried to sit down with Mr. Nixon to discuss these reports but was denied entry by chief of staff Alexander Haig.

This report is greeted skeptically by White House aides, who believe that the President would have met with Agnew at any time if the message he received had been one of impending indictment.

In any case, it is known that the meeting was a heated one and that Agnew declared at the outset that he had decided to hold a press conference to affirm his innocence. Agnew was more determined than ever to speak out when he left the meeting.

Agnew staffers are particularly distressed by what they see as White House reluctance to give the Vice President a full vote of confidence.

"The President did a lot more for Ehrlichman and Haldeman than he did for Agnew," said one Agnew aide angrily. His reference was to Mr. Nixon's April 30 speech in which he described Haldeman and Ehrlichman as "two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know."

Politically Limited

Agnew has received no such endorsements—and in the process he has begun to lose his identity as the "President's man" and to acquire independent stature. He will, of course, go down if the charges for which he is being investigated hold up in court. But if he is exonerated, he may enter the next political campaigns free of the mixed blessing of

being the chosen candidate of a tainted President.

Being the President's man had had its built-in problems in modern politics. It has often provided sufficient spring to win a party's nomination but not the presidency itself.

This was Nixon's fate in 1960, and Humphrey's in 1968.

Up to now, Agnew has been politically limited by being required to do pretty much what the President wanted him to do. It was this lack of ability to act independently that tied Humphrey to the Vietnam war and probably doomed his candidacy in 1968.

But Agnew is more than three years away from the 1976 election and his speech last week gave him more of an independent status than Humphrey ever acquired under President Johnson. If Agnew comes out of the present affair with credit, his action is almost certain

to be the prelude to other independent decisions.

This possibility became clear to Agnew supporters last week as telegrams and letters applauding his stand poured into his office. The message was also apparent to other Republicans who have been perplexed by Mr. Nixon's unwillingness to speak out on Watergate.

One such Republican was freshman Rep. Robin Beard of Tennessee, who was asked in a homestate radio interview about the political consequences of the Watergate scandal. Beard replied that he expected voters to judge him on his own merits, then added:

"I will say that I was extremely impressed with Vice President Agnew and his attitude of coming right out, holding a press conference and just blasting back and saying I have nothing to hide, I am innocent of any charges... I like that kind of approach."



Associated Press

Taking a break after acknowledging he was under federal investigation, Vice President Agnew plays golf in Palm Springs, Calif., with partner Dr. William Voss.