

Agnew Ready to Go It Alone

Out of deepening mystery which conceals many vital details of last Saturday's (Sept. 1) conference between the nation's two highest officials, one hard fact has merged: Vice President Spiro Agnew bluntly informed President Nixon that, indicted or not, he will fight alone to the end any effort to force his resignation.

Agnew's line on no resignation, moreover, was coupled with an earthily frank assessment of his chances to be indicted by the grand jury.

Thus the Vice President's long, candid talk with the president, covering a full two hours—his second with Mr. Nixon on the criminal investigation into alleged kickbacks before Agnew was elected Vice President—amounted to a declaration of political independence from Richard M. Nixon.

The signal that Agnew was preparing his own lonely defense line, and would hold out on that line for as long as he could, was clearly evident in the careful construction he used in his Aug. 21 press conference demanding a full-fledged investigation of Justice Department leaks on the Agnew investigation. Agnew bluntly noted then that he would not be driven out of "the high office to which I have been

twice elected"—the only office in the land, besides the presidency, filled by a vote of all the people.

As viewed by some key presidential aides, Agnew has served notice on the President, and on the country, that if indicted he will continue to protest his total innocence; if convicted he will appeal all the way up to the Supreme Court.

"Ted Agnew is handling his problems in an extremely shrewd manner," one admiring official told us. "If he is indicted, he might be able to tie this thing up in the courts until the second Nixon term comes to a natural end."

Agnew admirers, numbering among them some of the most influential politicians in the Republican Party, are coldly unambiguous in describing their hopes and convictions of how the Vice President would react to an indictment.

He would, they predict, first move completely away from any direct contact with the executive branch. Closing his office in the Executive Office Building across the street from the White House, he would retreat to his Capitol Hill offices and remain there, carrying out his constitutional duties: that is, presiding over the Senate.

That separation would have more symbolic than practical effect. It would symbolize Agnew's freedom of action as an official elected by all the voters.

How much of this granite-hard mood so clearly felt by Agnew's admirers was also reflected in last Saturday's Oval Office conference is still a mystery, but it is no mystery at all that Agnew has been aggrieved by White House actions involving him.

Thus, Agnewites regard the White House decision a week ago to announce his meeting with the President as a "calculated nuance" designed to embarrass Agnew. The Vice President had quietly and routinely suggested he meet with Mr. Nixon when the President returned from California at the President's convenience. The announcement at San Clemente carried hints of a momentous pending event.

Likewise, Agnewites scoff at the White House rationale that the unusual public announcement of the meeting was necessary because of rumors Agnew would resign. All such rumors, say intimates of the Vice President, emanated not from Agnewites but from sources close to the White House.

Further, Republican politicians

close to Agnew are now reporting as a hard fact what was only vaguely hinted in early 1972 when the Agnew-Nixon ticket was still a question. They now say that Agnew, rightly or wrongly, was convinced Mr. Nixon wanted to knock him off the ticket in favor of John B. Connally.

Finally, the Vice President has found an invidious contrast between Mr. Nixon's tepid defense of him (always limited to his vice presidency) and the defense of Agnew by such other politicians as Democrat Marvin Mandel, Agnew's successor as governor of Maryland. "Knowing the individual and having worked with him," Mandel has said, "I would be greatly shocked and amazed if some of the accusations made were true."

All this is in the background of Agnew's new independence. Whether his strategy could overcome a possible post-indictment move to impeach him, on grounds that no one indicted on criminal charges should stand a heartbeat away from the presidency, is something for the future.

For the present, as he informed Mr. Nixon last week, Agnew is more his own man than ever before, whatever lies ahead.