

Agnew Rips Watergate 'Atmosphere'

ST. CHARLES (Ill.) — (UPI) — Vice President Agnew said yesterday the most dangerous outgrowth of the Watergate scandal is "the persecutorial atmosphere hanging over the American political system."

Agnew specifically criticized Sen. Sam Ervin (D-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Watergate investigating committee, for doing a "rain dance" to embarrass President Nixon during the hearings.

He predicted Americans would not tar the entire Republican Party "for the misguided actions of a few zealots" and said "I have never been more proud of my party" despite the "real and tragic abuses" in the Watergate affair.

In what was billed by his office as a major address, Agnew made no direct refer-

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ence to charges involving him with a federal grand jury investigation of political corruption in Maryland where he served as governor before becoming vice president.

But in his speech to a Republican dinner: "Today . . . the movitees of those of us involved in politics at all levels are being called into question. Many assume that we are out simply for ourselves, with no thought of the public interest."

At another point, Agnew told the dinner in honor of House Republican whip Leslie Arends of Illinois: "Those embittered critics of this administration and this party who could not discredit us at the polls in November will make every effort — no matter how reckless — to discredit us now."

"The preoccupation with anything and everything related to Watergate is the most obvious but not necessarily the most insidious by-product of the affair," Agnew said. "Far more dangerous, in my opinion, is the persecutorial atmosphere hanging over the American political system."

Agnew charged that Ervin and some other Democrats on the select Senate Water-

gate committee were trying to "milk this issue dry."

"Our opponents will argue that the strength of our free system lies in our willingness to wash our dirty linen in public; and to some extent, they are right," he said.

"But even a strong garment cannot be put through the washing machine over and over without wearing it out, and I happen to think that the Watergate jeans are losing their blue and beginning to fall apart."

Agnew quoted former President Lyndon Johnson as saying "the presidency is like being a jackass caught in a hailstorm — you've got to just stand there and take it."

"Well, President Nixon has been standing there and taking it ever since Sen. Ervin has been doing his rain dance in that Washington committee room. The good senator wanted a warm summer rain to make Democrats grow, but it seems to me that if public opinion continues to cool that rain, Sen. Ervin might find himself in the same kind of hailstorm that President Johnson mentioned.

"I suspect," he added, "that by 1974 the American people are going to be asking not who yelled loudest about Watergate, but who was out there looking for answers to our economic problems and working for world peace. The American people are fair-minded and considerably more intelligent than some of our opponents seem to think."