

A Nattering Nabob of Nixonism

By Tom Wicker

Vice President Agnew appeared to be at his alliterative apogee the other night when he told a Republican audience that "we have reached the watershed of Watergate" (although that could be taken to mean that everything will be downhill from here on). When he got to his main theme, however, Mr. Agnew sounded like nothing so much as a nattering nabob of Nixonism.

Watergate, he said, was "the misguided actions of a few zealots" that had been blown into a storm by the "rain dance" of Senator Ervin and his committee. The true story was that "embittered critics of this Administration and [the Republican] party who could not discredit us at the polls in November will make every effort—no matter how reckless—to discredit us now."

Well, there are some "embittered critics" of this Administration, all right, but no one other than Mr. Agnew has suggested that the Republican party was to be blamed for Watergate; and in fact, no one other than Mr. Agnew has suggested that the Republican party was even involved in the Nixon re-election effort, since he neither used its name and machinery nor campaigned for its other candidates.

Apart from all that, and bearing in mind Mr. Agnew's useful reminder that those accused have not necessarily been proved guilty of anything, it is undeniable fact that:

1. Seven former employes of the

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Nixon White House, the Nixon re-election committee, or both, have been convicted of crimes.

2. Four former Nixon White House staff members have been indicted as a result of the burglary of a psychiatrist's office in Los Angeles in 1971.

3. Although no other Cabinet or former Cabinet official has been indicted for criminal acts for nearly half a century, two former Nixon Cabinet officers, who were also at one time the highest-ranking officers of his re-election committee, go on trial this week for obstruction of justice, conspiracy and perjury.

4. These cases resulted not from rain-dancing in the Senate but from the deliberations of three separate grand juries in Los Angeles, Washington and New York.

5. At least a dozen officials of the

Nixon Administration have resigned or been fired in connection with the Watergate and related scandals, all within less than three months.

6. At least one major company has admitted making an illegal contribution to the Nixon re-election committee, under pressure from its fundraisers and with an eye to a case pending before a Government regulatory agency.

Without prejudging any of these facts, as to the guilt or innocence of any person charged, this record alone is more than enough to refute the Agnewian assininity that "embittered critics" are merely doing through Watergate what they could not do at the polls. Who could even have conceived such a conspiracy, let alone carried it through?

In fact, Mr. Agnew—himself potentially in trouble because of an investigation that might reach still a fourth grand jury in still a fourth city—appeared mostly to be reaching for needed political support within his party and within the White House, in both of which he undoubtedly needs it.

The President and his lawyers may well have a good deal to say — if not the final say — as to whether the Agnew case goes to grand jury; if Mr. Agnew is indicted, the President could and probably would bring tremendous pressure on him to resign, so that Mr. Nixon could nominate a new man. Mr. Agnew had good reason, therefore, to parrot the White House line that its enemies are out to get Mr. Nixon.

He had good reason, too, to make a valiant defense of a Republican party that is not noticeably under attack. The same night he spoke, John B. Connally Jr., Sam Yorty's predecessor in party-switching, was appearing before an important California Republican assembly; the next day, that state's Gov. Ronald Reagan plugged his tricky new tax plan before the same group. Republicans being notably clannish, Mr. Connally apparently got an apostate's welcome, Mr. Reagan one for a hero. But each is a potential heir to Mr. Agnew's hitherto solid conservative backing at a time when every indicator suggests that the investigation hanging over his head already has dimmed the Vice President's prospects for 1976.

Not that Mr. Nixon would necessarily choose one of those two for Vice President if Mr. Agnew had to resign. Unless the President has changed his mind in recent years, he would rule out Mr. Reagan because of the Governor's know-nothingism in foreign affairs; and to give a recently recycled Democrat like Mr. Connally such an important leg-up might well split the Republican party for 1976 and further alienate Congressional Democrats.

But with so many — the grand jury, Mr. Nixon, Mr. Connally, Mr. Reagan — breathing hotly on his neck, Mr. Agnew can hardly be blamed for setting up "embittered critics" as straw men he could knock over. That's just good Nixonism.