

A Mood of 'No Resignation'

Headline speculation about Vice president Spiro T. Agnew's imminent resignation has now all but persuaded Agnew to prepare a "flat denial" to be issued not at a press conference but through some unidentified forum that would dramatically reach the nation.

The timing is uncertain, but Agnew's mood is not. He has no present intention of resigning, which his friends claim would amount to a confession of guilt. But Agnew refused repeated requests for prepublication comment on the carefully written speculative story by The Washington Post's highly reliable David Broder, who attributed the prediction to "a senior Republican figure strongly in Agnew's corner."

Agnew's refusal to deny the speculation was in keeping with his reluctance to make official denials of the swarm of speculative stories about his intentions amid the worst political storm ever to strike a Vice President.

The "senior Republican figure," according to Agnew's friends, is not Sen. Barry Goldwater, as has been widely rumored, but instead some other Agnew confidant who has seen Agnew for long and intimate discussions in the past few weeks. Out of these discussions emerged the possible rationale for an Agnew resignation.

As has been widely reported, Attorney General Elliot Richardson may send the allegations and evidence against Agnew to the House of Representatives rather than seek a criminal indictment. Agnew worries deeply about two possible results if that happens.

First, the House might fail to come to grips with his impeachment, neither

voting for impeachment (in effect, an indictment leading to an actual trial in the Senate) nor voting to exonerate Agnew. Should that happen, Agnew would never rid himself of the cloud of guilt.

Second, if the House did come to grips with his impeachment, the process might unleash such a vicious, political struggle that the country, already weakened by the Watergate scandals, could be further polarized to cause serious and permanent damage.

It was lengthy conversation along these lines with the "senior Republican figure" which led to the reports that Agnew was on the verge of quitting his friends believe. By last Friday, in fact, rumors that Agnew had indeed decided to resign were flying wildly in Washington.

As one example of the wild atmosphere Friday, the Justice Department was informed by a wire service reporter that Newsweek had decided to change its cover at the last minute and replace the late President Allende of Chile with Agnew. Did that mean Agnew was about to quit? The Justice Department declined comment. Newsweek indeed considered a change in its cover but in the end decided against it.

One reason for Friday's seething rumors was a subtle change in phraseology at the Justice Department to answer questions about the conspiracy charges against the Vice President.

Until last Thursday, the department had invariably answered questions by saying "no decision" had been made on whether to send the Agnew case to the grand jury (for routine U.S.

prosecution), or to the House for non-routine impeachment proceedings. On Thursday, "no decision" became "no comment"—indicating that Richardson was on the verge of momentous decisions involving Agnew.

In fact, it is still unknown how Richardson will decide the question of whether Agnew can be tried before a federal court while sitting as Vice President or whether he must first be removed from office by impeachment.

By Saturday, those rumors had convinced some high administration officials not only that Agnew would quit but that he would be replaced by Richardson. Moreover, they coincided with Agnew's decision to talk out his deepest worries with his political allies, one of whom leaked the Vice President's concern.

However, Agnew's friends downgrade his private expressions of possible resignation by comparing them to President Nixon's similar feelings, revealed to his family two months ago and reported to the press by his daughter, Julie Eisenhower. In each case, they say, the hard decision actually to resign was not approached.

Whatever Richardson may decide and however the charges against him may turn out, Agnew insists to his friends that he genuinely believes himself to be innocent. Thus, to quit and leave himself open to charges that his resignation was a self-confession of guilt, is viewed by the Vice President and his friends as the worst possible course—no matter what he confided to his allies in a moment of anguish.