

Agnew at Bay

By Tom Wicker

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20—The Nixon Administration, as a derisive saying goes, is "all heart." It was willing to let Ernest Fitzgerald "bleed for a while." It was willing to let the pathetically loyal Pat Gray "twist slowly, slowly in the wind." Its list of political hulks, scrapped when necessary, runs from John Sears and Bob Ellsworth, who were among the earliest Nixon comeback workers, to John Mitchell, once something of a "father figure" to Mr. Nixon himself.

Now the pattern of this Administration's statements, non-statements, suggestions, hints and leaks makes it reasonable to conclude that Vice President Agnew, too, has been strung up to twist and bleed, the latest human sacrifice to the insatiable Nixonian god of political power. Clearly, the Administration has nothing to gain from having its own Vice President convicted of criminal charges; but just as clearly, an Administration littered with the wreckage of Watergate might think it had much to gain from maneuvering a tarnished Mr. Agnew out of office, whether or not he has been proved guilty of any crimes.

Attention already has been shifted from the "White House horrors" and Watergate to the Vice President; filling the vacancy that might result could be a prime political opportunity for Mr. Nixon and some of his men, as well as a chance to give the Administration the sort of new look its pitchmen and image experts are craving; and a forced resignation or impeachment could take the pressure off Mr. Nixon since neither Congress nor the country would want to go through such an experience twice.

Mr. Agnew's plight has been elevated to a crisis before the case, if any, against him has even been presented to a grand jury, or to the House of Representatives. Attorney General Richardson apparently has not decided whether to take either action; in effect, that means he has not decided whether there is a case warranting further action.

Now there seem to be three possibilities, none of them attractive. One is that Mr. Richardson could announce that the matter was being dropped for lack of evidence. That would satisfy no one, leave Mr. Agnew under a cloud of suspicion, raise the question of a whitewash, further cripple the Administration, and damage Mr. Richardson's own prospects.

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For all of those reasons, plus whatever weight the evidence may have, the matter seems more likely to go eventually either to a grand jury for indictment, or to the House for impeachment. Mr. Agnew could be vindicated if the evidence proved insufficient; but if he was indicted or impeached, a trial would follow that would give him ample opportunity to confront his accusers and their evidence, and to defend himself.

In that event, however, the pressures on him to resign might well become irresistible. The only real purpose of a Vice President is to take over the Presidency if necessary; could a man on trial for crimes do so? Should he even be in a position to do so? Whatever the legal and constitutional answer, the political answer—or Mr. Agnew's personal sense of the fitness of things—might require resignation.

The third possibility is that Mr. Agnew might resign before Mr. Richardson made any further move, obviating the question of impeachment and perhaps influencing a decision on indictment. This would no doubt please the White House but it would also imply Mr. Agnew's guilt, and there is little reason why a man who proclaims his innocence would take such a step voluntarily. Bringing enough pressure to force him out politically, when no legal action had been taken, would be difficult and might make the sacrifice a little too public for the Administration's comfort.

Whatever is to be done in this wretched situation, Mr. Richardson ought to do it quickly; the spectacle of Mr. Agnew twisting in the wind is neither edifying nor necessary.

If any of these or some other developments should result in Mr. Agnew's resignation before his guilt for any crime is established, Mr. Nixon and those around him had better be careful in choosing a successor. They may not really have a "free hand" in doing so, and the short-run political advantages may have far different long-term consequences.

At any rate, it is no more in defense of Spiro Agnew than of common human decency to say that if it becomes apparent that he was sacrificed so that a Presidential nominee for 1976 could be put in his place, the point of public revulsion may finally be reached.