

Problems for the President, Vice President and G.O.P.

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 27

Vice Presidents count for little in the American scheme of things. They are likely to spend their careers—if not like Alexander Throttlebottom, taking tours through the White House—in relative obscurity. They affect the political equation only when they are chosen as candidates (is the ticket balanced?), when they say something controversial (did the President authorize that?), when they do something reprehensible (can the President tolerate that?) and when they succeed to the Presidency.

News Analysis

Never in American political history has there been a situation parallel to that which the country faces today—a President in trouble, his word doubted by a majority of the electorate, according to the polls, and a Vice President equally suspect. The result for both men is a minefield of problems, through which they walk each day with great trepidation.

President Nixon obviously has more at stake than anyone else. His ability to lead the nation already undercut by Watergate, he finds himself—as yesterday's extraordinarily equivocal White House briefing demonstrated—with almost no room for free political maneuver.

All the suggestions that have been tentatively and privately advanced by the President's associates over the last three weeks have indicated that Mr. Nixon would be happiest if he could be rid of Mr. Agnew. The reasons put forth are several: He needs no further threads of scandal in his official family;

he feels betrayed by the Vice President; he has other Republicans in mind as his successor.

But he cannot move overtly against Mr. Agnew, his advisers agree, lest the suspicions of the conservatives be escalated into conviction. Thus, his unusual and conspicuous refusal to suggest any course of action to the beleaguered Vice President.

Nor can he afford to dictate policy to Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson, the man with direct responsibility for the Agnew prosecution. Partly because the public tends to view Brahmins as honest men, partly because of Mr. Richardson's own cleverness in staking out his independence, the Attorney General has become a token of rectitude for the Administration. He cannot be dismissed; indeed, he cannot be pressured too heavily, because he might choose to advertise the pressure and encourage charges of yet another cover-up.

Mr. Nixon must also worry about the legal precedents to be established by the Vice President's case. If the courts should rule that Mr. Agnew is subject to ordinary procedures—that he is not beyond the reach of all processes save impeachment—that would affect the President's own legal situation. He could hardly, in such circumstances, disregard what he chose to regard as a non-definitive court decree of the tapes.

But the President's perils do not stop there. He must consider the courses of action open to him should the Vice President resign or be removed from office. Again, there appears to be no obvious solution.

Suppose that he should send the name of a "seat-warmer" to the Congress, such as his old friend William P. Rogers or Senator Barry Goldwater. As John B. Connally said on television the other night, that might assure confirmation—but it would also suggest Presidential weakness and sacrifice an opportunity to suggest to the country that Mr. Nixon meant to reassert control.

On the other hand, suppose that he sent the name of a major political figure, such as Mr. Connally or Governor Rockefeller. Then Mr. Nixon runs two risks—rejection, or the anointment of a 1976 Presidential candidate before the political climate has become clear.

For Mr. Agnew, the situation is different. He has apparently decided that his fight is a fight for honor, not for his political future, for freedom from incarceration, not for the Presi-

dency. If that is so, he will be willing to take great risks, including protracted and embarrassing court tests, to prove his point. He will not be receptive to subtle suasion.

Surely he would quit if Mr. Nixon publicly asked him to do so. But, for the reasons suggested above, the President is not likely to do so, at least not in the immediate future. So the outlook is for a crippled and embattled Vice-Presidency.

None of this is comforting to the Republican party. In a sense, the Agnew problem is far more serious than Watergate; the latter could be blamed on unprofessional zealots, but the simultaneous travail of Mr. Nixon and Mr. Agnew, party stalwarts fear, may suggest to the country an underlying strain of corruption.

If Mr. Agnew is removed

from consideration for the 1976 nomination, as most professionals believe that he already has been, the party faces the loss of the advantages of succession to incumbency as well as the possibility of a free-for-all in which an extremist of the left or right could capture the nomination and lead the party to disaster in November, like Mr. Goldwater in 1964 and George McGovern (for the Democrats) in 1972.

Worst of all, some Republicans fear that watergate and the Agnew problem may reinforce the lingering public image of the party as a legacy of the Hoover years—as the adjunct of special privilege. In a time when it has just begun to appeal to the common man, largely as a result of social issues, that is the last thing that the Republican party wants.