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Toughing It Out' for Three

Remember that slogan of only 10 months ago, "Four More Years"? Now, in a nightmare reversal of what happened last November, we are to have three more years of dissension and blurred uncertainty over who governs and how.

Those close to the muddled legal process believe Vice President Spiro Agnew will be in office as his term expires in 1976. If this is proved out, it means that a man subject to indictable offenses of bribery, conspiracy and tax evasion will be one heartbeat away from the presidency of the United States.

The conjecture on Agnew's staying power, following his refusal to resign his office, is based on the following probabilities. Having wrapped himself in the Constitution by calling on the House of Representatives to investigate the charges against him, he, in effect, is challenging that body to impeach him.

Granting the request, which Speaker Carl Albert summarily rejected, the House would take months to carry out a thorough investigation. It would require a special staff as in the Watergate investigation on the Senate side

of the Capitol. Merely assembling the relevant material after a committee and a staff have been named would require weeks. Then the fierce glare of the hearings under the television lights could go on for many more weeks.

All this would be preliminary to consideration by the House of a bill of impeachment. Think of the debate with the prospect that each of the 435 members would have something to say. That marathon of labored oratory could be interminable.

In the opinion of this observer the House is unequal to such a challenge. The leadership is fumbling and unsure. While the Democrats have a majority of 150 seats, this includes Southerners who have been repeatedly rallied to the Republican side. The emotional response to the plight of a man caught in a web of campaign money and public favors will cut across party lines, since too many of the members themselves know what that kind of tangle means.

So with the avenue of impeachment closed, assuming these probabilities, prosecution in the courts goes forward. Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson

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has pledged that the allegations against Agnew will be taken before the grand jury in Baltimore. But the Vice President's attorney has raised the shield of the Constitution and that may be protection, if not in the lower court against the threat of a conviction, certainly on the way to the Supreme Court.

This raises the fantastic outlook of the President — on the issue of the tapes — and the Vice President both refusing the jurisdiction of the courts. Such a defiance of the orderly processes of a government of divided powers can hardly mean less than a breakdown of the system itself.

Sympathy for Agnew has been undoubtedly generated by what has appeared to be a concerted effort through leaks and insinuations of wrongdoing to force him out of office. The widely held belief is that the President wanted to be rid of him so he could name John Connally in his place. Despite repeated denials from the White House and the Justice Department, this belief has persisted.

While sympathy for his plight is understandable, the Vice President has done little during the first four years

to enlist support from other than the stalwarts in his own party. He spent much of the initial two years in a selective attack on the media—an attack believed to have been inspired by the President. In the kind of assignments abroad that have become routine for the No. 2 man he has handled himself capably enough.

After a press conference when the charges against him first surfaced, Agnew went out to stay with his friend Frank Sinatra in Sinatra's luxury empire in Palm Springs, Calif. In light of Sinatra's dubious reputation on several scores this seems a curious retreat. One of his old friends offered this explanation:

"You have to understand that when Nixon tapped him in 1968 in Miami Beach Spiro had never known the big time and the big money. The little money, yes, but not the big. That explains Sinatra and a lot of other things."

It is the bankruptcy not of an administration nor of a man, but of the system itself. The voice of moral leadership to point a way out of the morass is still to be heard.