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# Agnew's Plight

There is reason to feel sorry for Spiro Agnew in his present plight. Not that the Vice President has been unfairly done in by the Justice Department, as he and his supporters seem pleased to believe. The true sadness lies in the circumstance which finds the Vice President of the United States totally unfitted by experience to meet the troubles which beset him.

Two incidents demonstrate the Vice President's incapacity for dealing effectively with his present affairs. One is the bold claim that he will not resign even if indicted by the grand jury in Baltimore. Nobody aware of the realities of life in Washington could advance that claim.

If Mr. Agnew is indicted, the President could be obliged by solemn public commitments to force him out. At a minimum, Mr. Nixon would cut off all the Vice President's delegated functions. There would be no missions abroad, no service on various boards and commissions, no office in the White House complex—not even a telephone in the executive branch.

The Vice President could, of course, go up to Capitol Hill to fulfill his constitutional duty of presiding over the Senate. But Mr. Agnew has few friends in the Senate. He gave up presiding regularly over that body years ago when he was stung by a harsh comment made during the debate over the Anti-Ballistics Missile, or ABM.

The hard ball players in the Senate are already rubbing their hands over the fun they would have at Mr. Agnew's expense if he came back. Day after day they would be sarcastically congratulating Mr. Agnew on the floor for having learned his constitutional duties from a grand jury.

It would be the kind of punishment nobody could withstand—least of all a man as personally sensitive as the Vice President. Once that is taken into account, Mr. Agnew's claim that he would stay in office even if indicted is shown up as the merest bravado.

A second revealing incident was the Vice President's request last week that the House of Representatives move in to consider his case before it went to the grand jury. The request was made in extreme haste, without any preparation of Speaker Carl Albert or other Democratic leaders.

But anybody who knows anything about Washington knows one thing. It is that getting congressional approval for a controversial matter requires the most laborious preparation of key figures behind the scenes.

Without such careful laying of the ground, the Congress merely follows its natural instinct. The natural instinct is to duck hard cases. If nothing else, Speaker Albert and his men are world champions in rolling down the hill whatever is rolled up to them. Which is precisely what they did, and in a matter of hours, with the Vice President's request.

The reason why the Vice President is so ill-equipped for his present difficulties is clear. Most men in American politics move up gradually from office to office. They acquire knowledge and experience. They come to know instinctively what is possible and not possible in a given circumstance.

But the rise of the Vice President

has been by mere fluke. He was hand-picked by Mr. Nixon to be Vice President. Before that he had served only two years as governor of the small state of Maryland. He was elected largely thanks to a crazy Democratic primary.

Before becoming governor, Mr. Agnew was for four years chief executive of Baltimore County. But he owed that post also to a freak division in the Democratic Party. Thus the Vice President did not face the crises and problems usual to American politicians. He did not come to political responsibility with even the nominal equipment of the self-made man.

President Nixon could have changed that. He could have trained the Vice President up. He could have given him important diplomatic assignments. He could have given him true domestic responsibilities.

But the President chose to use his Vice President purely as a stump-speaker and fund-raiser. Mr. Agnew has transacted no piece of serious foreign business. He knew and knows nothing of the negotiations with Russia or China.

Nor did he have any serious part in domestic affairs. The making of the budget is a mystery to him. He is blind to the intricacies of legislation, and deaf to the moods of the Congress.

He now finds himself totally unprepared to meet the crisis of his life. He is making wild, demonstrably inaccurate charges about the Department of Justice. He is appealing to a Congress that has almost no sympathy for his case. He is posturing before the press and the public in a way that is going to make him look ridiculous.

It is a sad spectacle. Perhaps the saddest aspect of it is that Mr. Agnew is not alone. Like John Mitchell and John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman he is a man not much better or worse than most. Like them, he is in way over his head, thanks chiefly to Richard Nixon.

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