

Editor's Report

Agnew's agony

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NEW YORK — Comment on the same subject two weeks in a row is not normal in this space, but an exception simply has got to be made today for the news developments which continue to erupt around the singular figure of Spiro T. Agnew, Vice President of our more or less United States.



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It is a story whose historic importance happens to be matched by its fascinating human interest angles. Not only are the two top officials of the nation battling separate charges of wrongdoing, they have been widely seen as battling each other in an outwardly polite but deadly political struggle for individual survival.

If such a wholly unprecedented feud actually is or has been taking place — and my intent here is to consider the possibility — neither President

—Turn to Page B2, Col. 7

—From Page 1

Nixon nor Mr. Agnew could afford to admit it openly. Their fates are so inextricably intertwined that formal expression of mutual support is a virtual necessity.

Everything they say about each other, therefore, comes to be weighed against the circumstances of the moment in this great guessing game. Herein is a kind of supreme irony. For no matter what the two men say, some newsmen and commentators are certain to interpret it as merely another self-defense maneuver.

Such is the reading, naturally, given by such people to the somewhat anticlimactic speech delivered by Mr. Agnew Thursday night at a Republican fund-raising dinner in Chicago. He had been expected to continue his bitter attack on Justice Department "leaks" in the case against him. Instead he came up with a paean of praise for Mr. Nixon.

"We have a great President," he declared. "Thank God we have a man who has faced and handled some of the most unbelievable pressures ever known in the White House and has not yielded to them.

"I have been proud to serve under him."

To the cynics, to those who believe the two men are actually circling each other with daggers, the Chicago speech was seen as a move to shore up the public facade of administration good will. And, admittedly, such a facade had seemed to have some cracks in it.

Weeks of rumors that the White House was trying to force Mr. Agnew's resignation as the result of alleged bribery charges against him in Baltimore came to a climax last weekend. In a fighting speech in Los Angeles, the Vice President belligerently declared he will not resign even if indicted.

Simultaneously he flatly accused the Department of Justice, and especially Assistant Attorney General Henry Peterson, of being the source of deliberately planted news stories he called "unprofessional, malicious, outrageous" and a violation of his constitutional rights.

This defiant stand, which earlier had been prefaced by a fruitless request for an inquiry by the House of Representatives, set the stage for still another lengthy legal showdown on the Constitution itself. Mr. Agnew contends, and the Justice Department denies, that a Vice President is immune from indictment while he remains in office.

Anyway you look at it, Spiro Agnew's actions add up to a mammoth headache for his sponsor in the White House Oval Room. He has added another deep layer of complexity to the devils-food cake of government crisis cooked up by Watergate. Not only has he followed the President in claiming immunity from court action, he has done so with an attack on the motives of justice officials directly responsible to the President.

An all but incredible situation has been created. As noted by Newsweek magazine, it now is entirely possible for the U.S. to wind up with a President in open defiance of the Supreme Court and a Vice President refusing to resign even under the cloud of indictment — and possibly in defiance of the man who selected him for the job.

It was against this background that the President, in his press conference on Wednesday, endorsed Mr. Agnew's decision to fight as "an altogether proper one." He pleaded for the nation to presume the Vice President innocent of "charges he has denied to me privately on three occasions."

At the same time Mr. Nixon noted that "the charges are serious, not frivolous," and took direct issue with his running mate by entering a stout defense of Henry Petersen. He said flatly that if he had not been satisfied with Petersen's handling of the Agnew case he would have fired him.

Next day, in Chicago, Mr. Agnew praised the President and his policies instead of continuing his attack on the Justice Department, as expected.

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THE FASCINATING QUESTION REMAINS — Are the President and Vice President of the United States at personal loggerheads, as rumored for so long by the anti-Nixon grist mills in Washington?

You won't find the answer here. I certainly don't know, and I strongly suspect that all those anonymous sources who have been trying to promote an open fight don't know either. The only two men who know are Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew, and obviously neither is going to say so even if it is true.

You've got to remember that both are in extremely tough positions. Mr. Agnew is fighting for his reputation, the remnants of his political career, possibly his very freedom. Mr. Nixon, by contrast, is being hampered seriously in his efforts to get public attention away from scandal and back to business as usual.

My own feeling, knowing both men and knowing politics, is that each is acting according to character and disposition. The real pros in public life often have conflicting interests, but they seldom permit differences to become personal grievances.

Thus, there is no doubt in my mind whatever about the sincerity of the Agnew praise heaped upon Mr. Nixon in Chicago. And there is no doubt in my mind that Mr. Nixon, in his own way, is sincere in wishing his Vice President well. If the endorsement seems less than unqualified, it may well be the President considers it prudent not to be overly enthusiastic.

Much of the speculation in support of the rumored Nixon-Agnew feud comes from the fact that the President spoke up a lot quicker and with much more enthusiasm in voicing support for his two top aides than he did for his Vice President.

H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman were hailed as the finest of public servants even while being forced to resign. It admittedly is puzzling why similar unrestrained kudos were not given to Mr. Agnew, but a good deal of the puzzle vanishes when you recall the heavy criticism Mr. Nixon got for those kudos.

The Vice President, for his part, has stoked the rumors by permitting his staff to suggest White House vindictiveness against him. Politics being what it is, this could well be an agreed upon strategy. The image of a man all alone, battling valiantly for his job against all odds, is after all the most sympathetic posture Mr. Agnew could assume.

Summing it all up, I remain unconvinced that there is bad blood between the two men. There is not nearly enough evidence to go along with the suggestion, but that doesn't mean it isn't a remarkably fascinating possibility which merits the closest continuing attention.

In the meanwhile I certainly hope it is not true, and that both come out of their difficulties with total vindication — for our country's sake as well as their own.