

James Reston Reports

Dear Ted:

The most difficult decisions are often those that are the most personal, and I know your decision to resign as Vice President has been as difficult as any facing a man in public life could be. Your departure from the Administration leaves me with a great sense of personal loss. You have been a valued associate throughout these nearly five years that we have served together. However, I respect your decision, and I also respect ~~the concern for the national interest that led you to conclude that a~~

UPI Telephoto

The beginning lines of the President's reply to Agnew's letter

Capital Waits to See How Nixon Handles It

By James Reston
New York Times

Washington

For the 17th time in 184 years, the Republic is without a vice president, and the immediate question is how President Nixon will approach the choice of a person to succeed Spiro Agnew for the next three years and three months.

Eight times during these 184 years, a vice president has succeeded to the presidency in mid-term. With another war in progress in the Middle East, the administration weakened by scandals and resignations, and the people troubled by internal dissension and inflation, Mr. Nixon's decision comes at a particularly important moment in the history of the country.

Caution

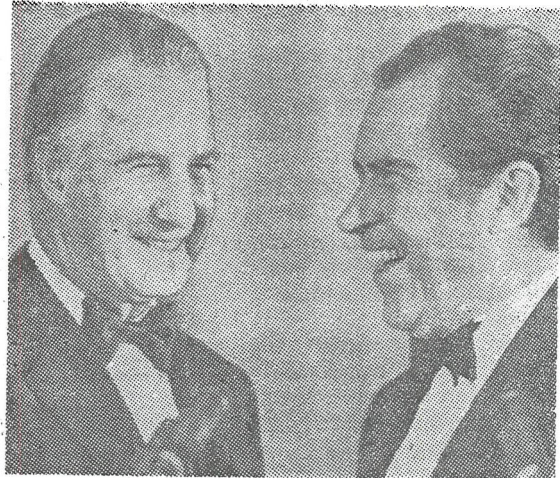
Mr. Nixon seems to be facing his decision in a cautious and responsible way. He had said that he had no "contingency plan" for replacing Agnew, and he has now committed himself to consult with other leaders of the Nation before submitting his nomination to the House and Senate, both of which must confirm the nomination under the 25th amendment by a majority vote.

Nevertheless, he is faced with a dilemma. It has been widely reported that he regards John Connally, former governor of Texas, former secretary of the Navy and former secretary of the Treasury, as the man best qualified to be President. But Connally is a controversial figure who has only recently joined the Republican party, and his choice would not only split the Republicans but also infuriate many Democrats.

Importance

This is why his approach to the decision is so important. While he must propose a qualified man, any attempt to select a probable candidate for the Presidency in 1976 would give the new vice president a big advantage in the election that year and lead to more political contention just when the country is looking for unity and calm.

The same problem arises with the nomination of either Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York or Governor Ronald Reagan of California. While the Democratic majority in Congress could scarcely reject either on merit, the nomination of the progressive Rockefeller would irritate the conservative Republicans, and the nomination of the conservative Reagan would annoy the progressive Republicans.



AP Wirephoto

AGNEW AND MR. NIXON LAST MAY
They met GOP campaign contributors

Accordingly, there has been considerable support here for selecting a capable caretaker vice president, who would avoid a bruising battle over confirmation, and commit himself not to be a candidate for the presidency in 1976.

**Analysis
and
Opinion**

Among those discussed regarding this approach to solving the problem are former Secretary of State and Attorney General William P. Rogers; former senator from Kentucky John Sherman Cooper; present White House aide Melvin Laird of Wisconsin, and the present Attorney General, Elliot L. Richardson, as well as his deputy, William Ruckelshaus.

Washington has been playing this guessing game for weeks, but was nevertheless stunned by the Agnew resignation and astonished to discover that last week's parlor gossip was suddenly an immediate decision of state.

In the interests of making a calm and orderly transition, it has even been suggested that the President might consider asking Chief Justice Warren Burger to resign from the court and stand for the vice presidency. Associate justices Lewis Powell Jr. of Virginia, Harry A. Blackmun of Minnesota, and Potter Stewart of Ohio have also been mentioned, though their enthusiasm for giving up lifetime appointments on the court to act as temporary designated hitters for Agnew might be somewhat limited.

Opposition

There is, however, strong opposition to this compromise "caretaker" idea. This city has gone through so many surprises and shocks in the last year that it has come to expect the worst.

During these past 12 months, it has elected one president by a landslide, only to find him a year later, not triumphant but despondent. Two former presidents, Harry S. Truman and Lyndon Johnson, have died in these last few months.

One war in Vietnam has ended, and just when the country was celebrating the first peace in a decade, another more dangerous war has started up in the oilfields at the cross-roads of the continents. All this and a devalued dollar, soaring prices, Watergate, and finally a confession that last month's "damned lies" were this week's truth have shaken the capital and made everybody ask, what next?

Pressure

So there is also pressure on the President here now, not to assume the best after the worst is so apparent, or to concern himself with the short-range interests of compromise candidates who will calm things down, but to concentrate on

choosing the best potential president available, on the theory that anything may happen and in the end, the best thing to do is the right thing to do.

It will be interesting to observe how the President deals with this philosophical question, with the conflicting advice he is now getting: to go for what he believes to be the "best," even if this provokes more battles and controversies he doesn't need, or to go for another compromise, which will calm things down.

In his "Dear Ted" letter, accepting the vice president's resignation, the President seemed to be almost apologetic. He praised the vice president's loyalty and courage, but Agnew had been caught for old sins long ago — not the new sins of political burglary, espionage, and sabotage, which are still before the courts.

Watergate

They didn't get him for big crimes like Cambodia or Watergate, which he didn't commit, but they got him on taxes, and the President, who has some tax problems of his own, let him go as gracefully as he could.

So the interesting thing here now is what the president does with all this. Nothing has quite worked out as he thought. The element of accident has confounded him ever since his triumphant re-election last November. Events have really been in the saddle. They have reduced his popularity, destroyed his vice president, indicted some of the principal members of his cabinet, forced the resignation of his old buddies on the White House staff, and now produced a new war in the most critical area of the world.

All this has not only startled but saddened Washington. It was the assumption of this administration that it could produce peace, but now it has another war; that it could reach an accommodation with the Soviets and the Chinese about a new order in the world, but now the Soviets are saying pleasant things on the "hot line," but provoking Algeria and Jordan to destroy Israel.

Order

Also, it was the assumption of this administration that it was the symbol of law and order, even that it could impose a new moral order on the republic, but now it has been caught breaking the law, and the resignation of the vice president is not the end of the story.

Still, with the resignation of Agnew, and the outbreak of war in the Middle East, there is a chance now to look at all these events and personal tragedies again. And this is what Washington is now watching for. It hasn't the vaguest idea of how Mr. Nixon will approach this new situation, so it waits, not really knowing him — after all these years, and asks questions.

Will he use this latest crisis to compromise on the appointment of a new vice president? Will he compromise on the tapes? Or will he try, like Agnew, to "tough it out" until events bring one more surprising disaster?

Nobody around here knows the answer to these questions, but this was the talk of the town after Agnew's resignation, and the first clue is likely to come when the president decides how to pick Agnew's successor.