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AGNEW AND MR. NIXON AFTER ACCEPTANCE SPEECHES, GOP CONVENTION IN 1968

The vice presidential nominee's gaffes began a few days later

The Rapid Rise and Fall Of Spiro T. Agnew

By Richard Homan
Washington Post

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Spiro Theodore Agnew's rise from the obscurity of a suburban Maryland courthouse to the nation's second-highest office was one of most rapid in American politics.

In 1960, while the world watched Richard Nixon lose the presidential campaign to the late John F. Kennedy, Agnew — in his first try for public office and hardly known outside his own neighborhood — ran fifth in a five-way contest for Baltimore county judge.

Two years later the son of a Greek immigrant vegetable peddler won his first public office — county executive of Baltimore county. In 1966 he was elected governor of Maryland. Then in 1968, just 21 months after leaving the suburban courthouse in Towson, Md., Agnew was nominated for the vice presidency.

Bumbles

Thrust suddenly into national politics, his initial bumbles led some top Republicans publicly to question his selection.

But he rode out the criticism, won the admiration of a broad segment of middle America in the late days of the campaign and, after the election, impressed the critical Washington establishment with his diligent devotion to the empty busywork ordained for vice presidents, and above all, his assiduous efforts to absorb detailed information about government.

Agnew was born Nov. 9, 1918, in downtown Baltimore, where his father, Theodore Spiro Agnew, who had emigrated from Greece 21 years earlier, operated a restaurant.

After graduating from Baltimore's public school system Agnew studied Chemistry at Johns Hopkins University, quit after two years and entered the army. He was discharged as a captain after service in the Battle of the Bulge. He was recalled for a year during the Korean War.

Law

After World War II, Agnew studied law at the University of Baltimore and graduated in 1947. His early career as a lawyer was difficult — with failures in his own office and in a large firm. He worked as an insurance claims adjuster, then as personnel manager for a small grocery chain before trying law again after the Korean War.

On the advice of a fatherly senior partner in his first law firm, Agnew had switched his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican — not for ideological reasons at first but because the far larger number of young Democratic attorneys made his chances for political advancement in that party slim.

The switch paid off in 1957. Agnew was appointed a minority member of his county's Democratic-controlled board of zoning appeals, and when the GOP later won control of the county, he became the board's chairman.

County

In 1962, running on a reform platform against a splintered Democratic party, Agnew was elected county executive of Baltimore county, which surrounds the problem-ridden inner city of Baltimore. With its virtually all-white population of 600,000, Baltimore county had the growth and development problems typical of America's suburbs.

In 1966, a three-way Democratic gubernatorial primary ended with Democrats again in full disarray, this time on a state level. George P. Mahoney, an inveterate candidate running on a blatantly white racist platform, was nominated for governor.

Against this background, Agnew was welcomed by Maryland liberals and blacks, although his own record in civil rights was middle-of-the-road. He carried some black precincts with 90 per cent of the vote.

Agnew brought a new kind of administration to the somnolent state house in Annapolis — with civil service appointments replacing patronage and technicians and specialists replacing politicians in top staff positions. He implemented a thorough reorganization of the executive branch along functional and managerial lines.

Blacks

He broke new racial ground in the

traditionally conservative Maryland State House by appointing blacks to his staff and by securing enactment of the state's first open-housing law and repeal of its centuries-old ban on mixed marriage. He issued a strict equal employment directive for state agencies.

But a series of events in early 1968, climaxed by a blunt lecture to black moderates in Baltimore after riots in that city, opened a chasm between Agnew and many of the state's white liberals and blacks that never was closed again.

"I publicly repudiate, condemn and reject all white racists," Agnew told the blacks he had called together in Baltimore. "I call upon you to publicly repudiate, condemn and reject all black racists. This, so far, you have not been willing to do."

Buoyed by hundreds of telegrams and letters applauding his Baltimore speech, Agnew adopted a "law and order" theme. "I have a lot of respect for a firm hand," he began telling audiences, "and God knows we haven't seen enough of that lately. You can't accept civil disobedience as a way of life."

Agnew went to the GOP National Convention in 1968 as chairman of an uncommitted Maryland delegation, but shortly after he arrived, he endorsed Mr. Nixon. Then, in his first performance on the national political stage, he delivered the speech nominating the next president.

The next day, after a night-long search for a candidate acceptable to north and south, Mr. Nixon was telling a puzzled Republican party that he wanted Agnew as his running mate.

It was clear that Agnew's prime attribute at that moment was his acceptability to southern, as well as northern, Republican figures.

Gaffes

The Gaffes began a few days later.

The vice presidential nominee called Hubert Humphrey "soft on crime" and "squishy soft" on communism. Then, prodded by other Republicans, he retracted. He referred to Polish-Americans as "Polacks" in a Chicago speech; on his campaign plane he jokingly referred to an American of Japanese descent as a "fat Jap."

Aides from the Nixon camp were attached to Agnew's campaign staff, and the vice presidential candidate was shunted to the side in the late days of the campaign, speaking mostly in the familiar white suburbs. On election eve, in contrast to the Humphrey-Muskie ticket, Mr. Nixon appeared without his running mate on a windup telethon.

After several quiet months learning his way around official Washington Agnew, late in the first year of his vice presidency, was back in the headlines, bluntly defending the Nixon administration and middle America against anti-war demonstrators and the news media, and traveling to Asia on a presidential goodwill mission.

Between the October and November anti-war moratoriums, the vice president excoriated the demonstrators as "an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals." They were led, he said, by "hard core dissidents and professional anarchists."

In the congressional elections of 1970 President Nixon assigned the vice president the chore of campaigning for administration friends — and cutting down administration enemies.

Introducing a new word into the political lexicon, the vice president declared war on "radclibs" (radical liberals) who concocted and pressed wild social schemes at the expense of middle America.

Again in the 1972 campaign, Agnew bore the brunt of Republican campaigning, while Mr. Nixon stayed at the White House "running the country" and projecting a statesmanlike image that made him difficult to assail.

In the Watergate fiasco that broke in June, 1972, and eventually engulfed the President, Agnew never was charged with any involvement, in either the break-in of Democratic headquarters or the later cover-up. While other Republicans kept silent, he gave outspoken support to Mr. Nixon.

However, in August, 1973, it was disclosed that Agnew was under federal investigation for possible violation of laws on conspiracy, extortion and bribery. He proclaimed his innocence — until yesterday.