

On Mister Agnew

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, Oct. 10—The man who carried the standard against "permissiveness" copped a plea today, and in return for his resignation, the judge and the Justice Department permitted him to go free.

The prosecutors must have had the evidence, as they say, and they must have had it cold. Assistant Attorney General Henry Petersen deserves congratulations for the confidence he showed in his case, though it can be hoped he will exercise more care in the number of people he expresses his confidence to in future cases.

People who believed the former Vice President's ringing protestations of innocence feel betrayed and shaken; people who felt the lash of his tongue over the years feel vindicated. But his friends and his foes would be mistaken to take the fall of any man to mean the end of all he said and all he stood for.

What was it that Spiro Agnew came to mean in American life, for good and for bad?

He was the man who made "elitism" famous. The "impudent snobs" he inveighed against were often unnecessarily impudent and certainly snobbish. There had always been a disdain for what used to be called "the great unwashed" by a social or intellectual elite: Agnew, as the voice of the "silent majority" (a phrase he coined six months before President Nixon used it) spoke out for egalitarianism, and was promptly, and unfairly, attacked for being a know-nothing or an anti-intellectual.

He stood up for the establishment against "those whose lifestyle has neither life nor style"—the professional aginners who all too often did not know what they were for, who wanted only to reject all forms of authority and treated dissent as an end in itself. This is where he smote "permissiveness," deriding the parents who produced a "Spock-marked generation" and fell for "demand feeding up to the age of thirty."

The rise of Agnew put a crimp in the growth of adversary journalism, causing many writers and reporters, even while angrily wrapping themselves in the First Amendment, to wonder if they had not lost touch with their readers or viewers, and to ask themselves if objectivity were not a more important goal than persuasion.

As often happens, in the good, there was bad. Mr. Agnew's antipathy to the "media"—that's the sinister word for "press"—which he acquired under the press's bludgeoning in the 1968 campaign, became a kind of obsession with

him: Even last week, when he had a chance to strike a blow for individual liberty against prosecution-by-leak, he could not resist the chance to subpoena reporters instead of concentrating on leakers.

In his anti-*elitist* posture, he went beyond the expounding of egalitarianism, beyond the dignifying of the brow-beaten will of the people, to the unnecessary provocations of the "rotten apples" as he stood before audiences that demand what politicians call "red meat."

He recognized his own excess; after the campaign of 1970, in which the President designated him the "cutting edge" to keep Democratic candidates away from the economic issue, he restrained his rhetoric and gave evidence of thinking more deeply about those sociological matters he had raised.

As an articulator of unspoken issues, Mr. Agnew was good, certainly surprising to the man who chose him: Late one Miami night, after his 1968 acceptance speech, Candidate Nixon said to me about his running mate: "He can't make a speech worth a damn, but he won't fall apart."

But as a personal symbol, as the embodiment of a type, Agnew was more than good: He said what he meant, with no folderol. He stood for principle, even though it was popular; he stood for character, at a time when charisma was going out of style. And now he stands for hypocrisy, which he so effectively denounced, because he cannot say he was not once on the take.

According to his own anti-permissive precepts, the people who believed in him were wrong, but the people who believed in the message he carried are not wrong: This is a time to believe in "measures, not men."

I'll remember this saddened man for his sense of humor: As we came into San Diego in 1970, he noted how the reporters were picking up his alliterative phrases, so he asked his writers to come up with the biggest, self-mocking whopper we could think of to slip into a speech about undue pessimism.

We gave him a choice of "hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history" and "nattering nabobs of negativism." The Vice President laughed, said, "Hell, let's use both," and—tongue in cheek—sailed them into the political language.

It's a good thing he quit; he would never again have been a happy warrior.