

Matter of Fact

How Agnew Found Himself in Trouble

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NOW THAT Vice President Spiro Agnew's ordeal is over by his own decision and the Justice Department's consent, the watchword here is to be compassionate. Consider the situation of a fairly poorly paid county official of small means — which Spiro T. Agnew was before he became governor of Maryland.

In a place like Baltimore County, in these last two decades, a single change of zoning has been enough to make several very large fortunes. Even a sewer permit has been worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some States, like Maryland, have a long tradition of political office as a profitable way of life. So it is easy enough to see how Agnew found himself in trouble.

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THAT MUCH being said, however, it must be further said that a good many tears have been falsely shed in recent weeks. Vice Presidents are, by definition, politicians who have scaled the heights, whether by luck or good management. Experienced politicians who have scaled the heights simply do not offer resignations and enter pleas when the charges against them can be successfully denied.

In this case, the Justice Department's massive 40-page statement of the facts in the case makes plain that this was a case that went a bit further than the zoning change - sewer permit sort of thing. For example, there were those 5 per cent fees paid by winners of engineering contracts.

The Justice Department has previously

been accused of being far too hard on the Vice President, and being "out to get him." A considerable number of rightwing Republicans even believe that the President was out to get his own Vice President — that Richard M. Nixon was craftily trying to make Spiro Agnew a scapegoat for his own troubles.

All that can now be seen to have been pure hogwash. The wonder is, rather, why the Vice President and his lawyers broke off their negotiations with the Justice Department in September. The same terms were open to the Agnew team then that were accepted this week. Yet in September, these terms were angrily rejected.

One has to conclude, therefore, that the aim in September was to experiment with the effects of a political offensive by the Vice President. One can see no purpose, unless it was the hope that the hell-raising would secure better terms.

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LAST FRIDAY however, the Justice Department was abruptly notified by the Agnew lawyers that they would like to resume the negotiations that had been so openly broken off. The old terms were offered once again by Attorney General Elliot Richardson. This time, after a little haggling about details, the terms were accepted. You could have no clearer justification of the course the Justice Department and the White House have followed.

In the light of the Justice Department statements of facts, the President and the Attorney General are in truth seen to have treated the Vice President pretty gently.